

Model of Staged Accession to the EU

The Staged Accession Model – a proposal developed by the *European Policy Centre (CEP – Belgrade)* and the *Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS – Brussels)* – seeks to turn new enlargements of the European Union into a feasible reality. Its objectives are thus twofold:

- 1) **To enhance the credibility of EU enlargement policy** – By proposing a system of additional financial and institutional benefits in the course of the accession process, based on the successful achievement of reforms, the proposal seeks to unlock political will to move forward with essential reforms.
- 2) **To ensure that enlargement does not undermine the functioning of the EU** – By proposing a temporary limitation of the newcomers' veto rights, accompanied by a network of safeguard clauses to prevent or sanction post-accession backsliding, the aim is to mitigate member states' concerns over the functioning of the EU decision-making process with 30+ members.

While CEP Belgrade published its [first proposal](#) on gradual EU integration back in 2018, the ['Template for Staged Accession to the EU'](#) emerged a few years later – in 2021. Based on a series of [background papers](#), a fully revised version of the Model, [Template 2.0](#), was published in 2023. Recognising that the European Council, in June 2022, [endorsed](#) the idea of “gradual integration” as the official approach to enlargement, the authors' overall aim is now to operationalise the Model in practice, to maximise the impact of the proposal and make the most of the current enlargement momentum. Against that backdrop, by the end of March 2024, CEP representatives will have visited 20 out of the 27 member states, engaging with the executive and legislative branches, as well as think tanks. The advocacy mission in Finland was successfully carried out in late January 2024.

To fulfil the above-mentioned objectives, the Model proposes to revitalise the entire accession process by breaking it down into four stages – two in the pre-accession, and two in the post-accession period.

Pre-accession stages: conditions and benefits

Building upon the 2020 revised enlargement methodology, **the Staged Accession Model introduces the long-needed predictability to the process by tying access to new benefits for candidates to the level of accomplished reforms during the pre-accession period.** To qualify for Stage 1 benefits, a candidate country would have to achieve an average *moderate* level of preparedness in *each* cluster, while a higher, *good* level would be needed to acquire the more generous, Stage 2 benefits. In other words, the higher the overall level of preparedness, the greater the benefits, which entail:

- 1) **Gradual access to EU institutions** – i.e. the regular meetings of the European Council, the Council of the EU (at all levels), the European Parliament, comitology, European Commission's expert groups, etc. Although candidate countries' officials would be obliged to leave the room before the decision-making procedure takes place, such institutional participation would enable them to engage in exchanging views with member states' officials on mainstream EU policy issues, socialise with their EU peers and gradually develop the capacities of their administrations to assume full membership responsibilities. While access would be selective in Stage 1, focusing on policy areas with the highest compliance with EU standards, in Stage 2, it would become generalised, i.e. extending to all policy fields. At present, access to EU institutions is quite rare and sporadic, while not being based on merit.
- 2) **Access to gradually increasing funds**, designed to mirror those available to member states. Increasing the funding in the pre-accession period will help reduce the socio-economic convergence gap between the candidates and the EU average, which has recently been expanding. Moreover, it will encourage the development of domestic absorption capacities and reduce the space for malign external actor involvement while increasing the EU's economic leverage in candidate countries. The Model proposes that as they reach Stage 1 membership preparedness level, countries gain access to up to 40% of the funding amounts that they would be eligible for as member states. The envelope would further increase to up to 60% in Stage 2.

The Model respects the EU's **“fundamentals first” approach**, by placing emphasis on Cluster 1 preparedness assessments: namely, while other clusters are expected to achieve an *average* moderate and good rating for each stage, Cluster 1 must have *each* chapter and sub-area at the required level for a country to qualify for those benefits.¹ Thus, by insisting that tangible reforms in the rule of law and other related areas must take place before a country can reap the benefits, the Model aims to give genuine meaning to the term “frontrunner”. **All benefits would be**

¹ Cluster 1 (*Fundamentals*) consists of Chapter 5 – Public Procurement, Chapter 18 – Statistics, Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, Chapter 24 – Justice, Freedom, and Security, and Chapter 32 – Financial Control, as well as three sub-areas: Functioning of Democratic Institutions, Economic Criteria, and Public Administration Reform.

reversible, in proportion to the seriousness of a country's reform backsliding, thereby increasing the opportunity costs associated with being a "backbencher". This stands in sharp contrast to the current situation, where both funding and possibilities for institutional interaction with the EU are largely unrelated to how well a country is prepared to uphold fundamental EU values and apply its legislation.²

While the Staged Accession Model prioritises horizontal progression towards membership (requiring all clusters to achieve a higher average rating to access stage benefits), it can also **be complemented by sectoral integration approaches**. These encompass the possibility of increasing integration with the EU's single market (for example, for goods manufactured in the Western Balkans following alignment with the relevant EU product *acquis*), and benefiting from various EU cross-national programmes, agencies, alliances and initiatives while deepening the cooperation through the existing EU-Western Balkan formats such as Transport and Energy Communities, Green Agenda, and Green Lanes. However, the difference between the Model's horizontal approach and the sectoral approach lies in the fact that the latter foresees no systematic application of the principle of conditionality in relation to the 'fundamentals first' method of the enlargement process (respect for democracy, rule of law, and justice sector reforms). While the sectoral approach can contribute to integrating economies into the EU's single market, it is not expected to yield a transformative or incentivising effect. Therefore, the Model's logic can align with such proposals, as long as they are merit-based and do not necessitate the negotiation and ratification of new international agreements, which would divert crucial administrative capacity from the main task of negotiating full EU membership.

Post-accession stages: protecting interests on both sides

The Model is unique in that it effectively addresses the fears of sceptical member states that the EU might become dysfunctional as the number of newcomers – each of which becomes a veto player in the Council – increases. Recognising the legitimacy of those concerns, particularly as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have joined the Western Balkan countries in the membership waiting room, the Model proposes to **temporarily limit the veto rights of newcomers in the Council of the EU** in Stage 3, within the initial decade of membership for instance. In practice, such a derogation would be legally solidified by an Act of Accession. Once the Act is ratified by all sides, the acceding country would enter the Union as a New Member State. As such, it would draw all standard membership rights and obligations – apart from the right to cast a negative vote in unanimity-ruled decisions. Although this would introduce a new sort of differentiation between member states, such a proposal would nevertheless respect the principle of equality of member states, as it would be *temporary* and would *automatically expire*. From the member states' perspective, such an arrangement may have several advantages:

- 1) Member states would be incentivised to increase pre-accession benefits as a matter of political compromise and compensation to the countries that would become subject to veto limitations as future members.
- 2) The EU would avoid a scenario where a candidate closes accession negotiations, only to see its membership put on hold due to the failure by the EU to complete its internal reforms and preparations for enlargement in time.
- 3) The Union would be able to continue reforming itself while simultaneously incorporating new members.
- 4) The impending automatic expiration of veto limitations after the foreseen transitional period would maintain a degree of pressure on member states to complete EU internal reforms in an effective and timely manner.

Simultaneously, the Model suggests **building a robust network of safeguard clauses** as a mechanism to prevent or sanction post-accession backsliding among New Member States. Already part of enlargement history, safeguard clauses were applied to the accessions of Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia. Once these clauses are activated, the measures imposed on their basis can last as long as the issues that triggered them remain unresolved. Moreover, they can be activated by the Commission or on a member state's request, thus avoiding the unanimity trap. To make them fit for the upcoming enlargement cycles, the Staged Accession Model proposes to:

- 1) **Extend their duration** – While in the past they were designed to be triggered only within the first three years of membership, in the future they could be extended to up to ten years, akin to the duration of veto limitations.
- 2) **Expand their scope** – Having previously been applied only to the areas of Justice and Home Affairs, and Internal Market, in the future they could be expanded to other areas, including the entire scope of fundamental values.

Stage 3 also **protects the interests of new members**. A special *emergency brake* embedded in the Accession Act would protect their vital national interests in case they were to be endangered by a decision taken unanimously by other member states, allowing them to raise the issue to the level of the European Council, in which they would participate as equals. As the temporary derogation of veto rights would expire automatically, they would ultimately be protected from becoming "second-class" members and would, over a decade, graduate into conventional membership (Stage 4 of the Model).

² The [New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#) promises to change that approach. Proposed by the European Commission in November 2023 and currently undergoing revisions in the Council and the European Parliament, it consists of €2 billion in grants and €4 billion in concessional loans, with payment *conditioned* on the Western Balkans' partners fulfilling specific socio-economic and fundamental reforms.