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A Europe that Acts: Effective **Decision-making** on **Enlargement** in a New Geopolitical Era

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Introduction¹

The Russian aggression against Ukraine and the increasingly unconstrained great power rivalry at the global scene have elevated the EU's enlargement policy into a central question of European security. Enlargement is no longer the technical process or the secondary policy area as it was for over a decade: it is now a test of the EU's ability to project stability, consolidate its continent, and act strategically. The European Commission and most EU Member States have rightly put enlargement high on their agenda, hinting that the accession of new countries is within reach.² The long-overdue pre-enlargement policy and governance reviews³ laying out the plan for related EU internal reforms will be a moment of truth for whether the EU is prepared to adapt its decision-making rules concerning enlargement in order to deliver on this renewed mission.

Unanimity has always governed the key milestones of the enlargement process, as mandated by Article 49 TEU. While this hard legal requirement was always in place for the main decisions, the practice has progressively expanded well beyond those foundational moments. Over time, and particularly following the post-2004 shift toward a more cautious, politically steered enlargement reflected in the 2006 renewed consensus and reinforced by the 2020 revised methodology, unanimity has come to pervade virtually every procedural step. The result has been a proliferation of veto points at even the most technical and incremental stages of the process, far exceeding what the negotiating frameworks themselves originally envisaged. This creeping expansion of unanimity in practice has exposed the process to recurrent political blockages, making accession slow, unpredictable, and increasingly disconnected from the reform performance of candidate countries on the ground. The risk is clear: unless reforms are introduced, the Union will remain unable to act decisively on what once was its most powerful foreign policy tool.

Far from proposing anything revolutionary, the extension of qualified majority voting to steps forward in the accession process builds upon what the Member States have already

approved and sanctioned within the existing negotiating frameworks.⁴ The introduction of qualified majority voting in the Montenegro framework, and subsequently reverse qualified majority voting in the Moldova framework, reflect a deliberate methodological choice by Member States to make the accession process more effective and credible. The underlying rationale was clear: to ensure that backsliding could be addressed swiftly and decisively, without individual member states holding the process hostage. Yet consistency demands for the same rationale to be applied symmetrically – if qualified majority is there to stop unjustified progress in the process, it should equally facilitate rewarding genuine performance. Rewarding candidates for progress made is not merely a political courtesy; it is a strategic necessity for the credibility of the enlargement process as a whole, which Article 49 TEU enshrines as a fundamental commitment of the Union. Full consistency with the effectiveness model chosen by Member States would therefore mean that qualified majority voting applies not only when sanctioning backsliding but equally when rewarding progress. This symmetry does not alter the spirit of the negotiating frameworks; it completes it. The strategic importance of enlargement to the European Union, underscored repeatedly in the European Council conclusions, requires that the procedural architecture be as responsive to success as it is robust against failure. What is proposed here is therefore nothing more than taking the Member States' own methodological choices seriously, and building upon them to ensure the process delivers on its promise.

Introducing qualified majority voting at intermediary stages of the enlargement process is precisely the remedy to address this inconsistency. Rather than depoliticizing the process or diminishing member-state sovereignty over the Union's most consequential decisions, it simply restores coherence between the logic already embedded in the negotiating frameworks and the voting practice that has drifted so far beyond it. Unanimity would remain in place for the two Treaty-mandated political acts: the start (via the conditions of eligibility agreed upon in the European Council) and the end of the long accession process (by the Council vote by unanimity, after consulting the Commission and after receiving the consent of the European Parliament). QMV would instead reallocate political contestation to the appropriate level by preventing technical or procedural steps from being held hostage to unrelated bilateral or domestic political considerations.

1 The authors would like to thank the interviewed officials and the participants in the closed-door roundtable discussion on "Enhancing the Efficiency and Credibility of the EU Enlargement Process", organized by the Erste Foundation in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria on 28 February 2025, for their insights. The authors are also grateful to Christophe Hillion, Steven Blockmans, Sabina Lange, and Funda Tekin, for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

2 "For the first time in more than a decade, enlargement has become a realistic possibility", underlined EC President von der Leyen in her statement following the EU-Western Balkans Summit in December 2025.

3 Announced by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her 2023 State of the Union address.

4 Introducing QMV in the intermediate stages of enlargement has been proposed in several studies, including: Franco-German Expert group on EU reform, "Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century," 2023, 21; and Srđjan Svijic and Adnan Cerimagic, "Rebuilding Our House Of Cards: With More Glue", IDSCS, 2020, 9.

This paper does not advocate a single institutional outcome. Its purpose is to structure an ongoing debate among EU Member States by clarifying the political trade-offs associated with different decision-making models in enlargement. By mapping a range of QMV options and their implications, the paper aims to support informed political judgment rather than prescribe a predetermined path.

1. Why Change Is Necessary

For much of the past decade, enlargement suffered from limited political attention within the EU. The prevailing narrative emphasized the need to “digest” previous rounds of enlargement before taking new commitments. In this context, enlargement decision-making drifted into excessive proceduralism: unanimity came to govern not only the major political milestones, but also increasingly technical and intermediary steps. What was meant to safeguard consensus instead fragmented the process into dozens of veto points. Not surprisingly, more than twenty years into the current round of enlargement, the results were discouraging: some Western Balkan countries spent decades in the candidate “waiting room”, while others had been negotiating membership for over ten years without significant breakthroughs.

The Russian war in Ukraine triggered a renewed momentum for EU enlargement. With some candidate countries the results are tangible: Albania started its accession talks and opened all negotiating clusters, while Montenegro provisionally closed 13 chapters, on track to achieve its goal of closing all chapters this year.⁵ With others, such as Ukraine most notably, the opening of the first cluster has been consistently blocked by Hungary. Since anonymity is still required at every step in the process, Kyiv was not able to make any formal progress, prompting creative efforts toward advancing the technical side of the process.

This practice has had profound consequences. Bilateral disputes and domestically driven concerns in individual EU Member States have repeatedly blocked progress unrelated to accession criteria. As a result, the link between reform performance and advancement in the process has weakened. Candidate countries have learned that even substantial reforms may not be rewarded, undermining the credibility of conditionality and eroding trust in the

EU's commitments. As long as the current practice continues, there will be no merit-based process, no matter how many speeches and documents repeat this mantra. If the EU wants enlargement to again function as an effective instrument of foreign policy, it needs decision-making procedures that allow it to act efficiently, reduce unnecessary veto points, and respond to pressing geopolitical realities.

With the positions of governments on enlargement becoming increasingly distinctive, divergent, and unpredictable, the alignment of the EU27 has become nothing short of a miracle. With each country following its own election cycles, and with the rise of radical right parties and their participation in governments, the EU's political landscape shifts frequently and the mood on enlargement changes just as often. In combination with the long duration of the accession process as currently envisioned, this makes it increasingly difficult to sustain momentum. Add to this the ever-present possibility of vetoes, and the Union risks not only prolonged gridlock but an eventual political deadlock that undermines its ability to deliver on enlargement.

2. The Proliferation of Voting by Unanimity

Unanimity governs most stages of the enlargement process in practice. The Treaties, however, explicitly require unanimity in the Council only on the membership application and for agreeing the terms of accession, as set out in the Accession Treaty (Article 49 TEU). By contrast, the intermediate stages of the accession process, developed and refined over successive rounds of enlargement, are not explicitly regulated by the Treaties. As a result, the Treaties do not prescribe a specific voting rule for these intermediary decisions.

In the absence of an explicit Treaty requirement, and drawing on a long-established norm of consensus in enlargement matters, the Council has applied unanimity to these decisions as a matter of practice. From a strictly legal perspective, however, such intermediate procedural steps do not necessarily require unanimity and could, in principle, be adopted under the Council's default voting rule since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon –qualified majority voting (Article 16(3) TEU).

Two qualified majority thresholds may apply, depending on whether the Council is acting on a proposal from the Commission or from the High Representative (in this case the QMV is formed by at least 55% of Member States – 15

⁵ “Montenegro starts 2026 by closing another negotiating chapter,” The New Union Post, 27 January 2026, <https://newunionpost.eu/2026/01/27/montenegro-accession-negotiations-2026/>

in the Union of 27 – bringing together 65% of population, Art. 16(4) TEU) or the subject of the vote is not a proposal coming from these two sources. In the latter case the so called reinforced qualified majority applies (elevating the threshold of the number of Member States from at least 55% to at least 72%, i.e. 20 Member States in the Union of 27; Art. 238(2) TFEU).

The continued use of unanimity at intermediate stages of the accession process can therefore be understood less as a treaty obligation than as a reflection of political consensus and institutional practice among the EU Member States. Changing it, therefore, requires political will, rather than lengthy Treaty-changing procedures. Instead, adjustments in the majorities required can be made through revising the Council negotiating frameworks⁶ for each candidate individually, or more comprehensively, by updating the negotiating methodology itself – a change that would apply with full force to all countries currently engaged in accession negotiations by virtue of their acceptance of that methodology. While the revised enlargement methodology hints in the right direction underlying that “[All] parties must abstain from misusing outstanding issues in the EU accession process”, it falls short of fixing the problem of misuse.⁷

The process of reverting from fragmentation and a multitude of veto possibilities already began with the current Revised Enlargement Methodology, which grouped 35 negotiating chapters into six thematic clusters. This reduced the number of opportunities for Member States to block progress, but it did not resolve the underlying problem: unanimity is still required at each step, leaving the process vulnerable to obstruction.

Importantly, the current unanimity-based practice does not protect conditionality; it weakens it. When reform progress is disconnected from outcomes due to unrelated vetoes, standards lose credibility. By contrast, QMV would restore the political significance of benchmarks and Commission assessments by ensuring that reform performance is collectively evaluated and cannot be indefinitely blocked by a single government for reasons unrelated to accession criteria. QMV should therefore be understood as a conditionality-enabling mechanism rather than a permissive shortcut.

3. QMV Models and Voting Thresholds

To align decision-making with the renewed strategic importance of enlargement, the EU needs more efficient and resilient procedures. The current setup provides maximum control in the hands of a single member state, but lacks ambition and undermines credibility. The opposite would be to entrust the process fully to the Commission, having received a mandate by the Council to conduct the accession talks and revert to it in the final phase. While legally sound, this contradicts the political nature of the process and runs the risk of alienating the Member States. To fully restore the momentum, and more importantly to maintain it over a longer period of time, the Union must adopt a more balanced approach.

Introducing QMV at intermediary stages offers a spectrum of options, each balancing ambition with reassurance for EU Member States. It would streamline decision-making, reduce unnecessary blockages, and ensure that the EU can act with the speed and consistency required in today’s geopolitical environment. The models presented below are designed for illustrative purposes rather than as concrete advocacy proposals. They are intended to map the design space and demonstrate that meaningful reform is possible within the existing Treaty architecture. Each model represents one possible configuration – one permutation among many – of how scope, thresholds, and procedural safeguards can be combined. Just as different arrangements have already been conceived and applied for the suspension mechanism, equally varied configurations are conceivable for rewarding good performance and moving the process forward at different stages of the accession negotiations.

Four normative principles underpin the design logic across all models. The principle of **consistency is indispensable**; its absence—or neglect—is most damaging. The negotiating frameworks that Member States themselves have approved contain a sophisticated set of instruments and procedures designed to manage exactly the situations that currently give rise to unilateral vetoes. These include mechanisms to suspend negotiations where a serious and persistent breach of values is identified, and instruments to address imbalances between the Fundamentals cluster and other negotiating chapters. These tools exist. They have been agreed. And yet, in practice, some member states have systematically bypassed them, reaching instead for the bluntest instrument available: the veto. This inconsistency is damaging not only to the efficiency of the process but

6 Zweers, W., Ioannides, I., Nechev, Z., & Dimitrov, N. (2024). *Unlocking decision-making in EU enlargement*. Policy Brief, Clingendael Institute. 2024-06.

7 European Commission, “Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans”, COM(2020) 57 final.

to its credibility. It signals to candidate countries, and to the Union's partners more broadly, that the agreed rules are optional, and that the process is governed by political convenience rather than principled conditionality. Restoring consistency between what the negotiating frameworks provide and what Member States actually do is therefore not a technical correction; it is a prerequisite for the legitimacy of the entire enlargement architecture.

This points to the broader principle of **legitimacy**: any departure from unanimity must command sufficiently broad support among Member States to remain politically credible and durable. The models presented in this paper are not designed to push decisions through over meaningful opposition; they are designed to ensure that isolated or unrelated vetoes — those reflecting no genuine enlargement-related concern — cannot override the considered judgment of an overwhelming majority of Member States. A decision supported by 26 out of 27 Member States is not lacking in legitimacy; it is the veto that is illegitimate when deployed in the absence of any substantive accession-related justification. The principle of a **consensus-based approach** reinforces this point. None of the models proposed here abandon the consensual spirit of Article 49 TEU. On the contrary, by calibrating majority thresholds well above the standard QMV baseline, the models are expressly designed to preserve broad coalitions as the foundation of legitimacy in enlargement decisions. The difference is that consensus is embedded structurally in the threshold rather than weaponized through the procedural form of the veto. Finally, the principle of **efficiency** speaks directly to the strategic stakes. Thresholds must be calibrated to prevent isolated or unrelated political considerations from blocking decisions that enjoy overwhelming support.

Crucially, the models build directly on choices already made by Member States within the existing negotiating frameworks. The central role of the European Commission as the driver of the accession process is the anchor for the voting logic. Under standard EU decision-making, when the Commission makes a proposal, the standard QMV threshold of Article 16(4) TEU applies: 55% of Member States representing 65% of the EU population. Therefore, consistently with the negotiating frameworks and the Commission's established role, extending QMV to the opening of clusters and closing of chapters should follow that same standard formula. However, given the specific character of enlargement negotiations under Article 49 TEU — which envisages a fundamentally consensual dynamic — and given that the procedural framework in practice already departs from what Article 49 strictly requires, a stronger case can be made for applying a higher threshold. Article 238(3)

TFEU provides precisely such a higher threshold for cases where the Council does not act on a Commission or High Representative proposal, requiring 72% of Member States representing 65% of the population. This provision offers a Treaty-grounded justification for demanding broader coalitions on decisions of this political magnitude. The models below combine these different possibilities, applying different thresholds depending on the scope and sensitivity of the decisions in question — and it is this variation that gives each model its distinct character and degree of political reassurance.

A further, overarching design consideration concerns the relationship between scope and threshold: **the broader the application of QMV, the higher the majority required**. Where QMV is extended to the most sensitive decisions, the threshold must rise accordingly to preserve legitimacy and avoid the perception that enlargement is being pushed through over the objections of a significant minority of Member States. This inverse calibration is not a contradiction — it is the structural guarantee that makes the reform politically sustainable.

The following models illustrate how these principles can be operationalized across a continuum of ambition.

3.1 Full QMV Model

The Full QMV is the most effective and ambitious model, mirroring the proposal of the Franco-German Expert group on EU reform. It would extend standard qualified majority voting — as defined in Article 16(4) TEU: 55% of Member States representing 65% of the EU population — to all intermediary steps in the accession process, including the opening of all clusters and closing of all chapters, as well as the adoption of opening, interim, and closing benchmarks. Unanimity would be preserved only for the two major decisions at the beginning and the end of accession negotiations as mandated by the treaties.

While internally consistent and legally straightforward, this model is politically the most demanding. Applying standard QMV across the board, including to the most sensitive steps such as the closing of Fundamentals chapters, may generate concern among some Member States. For those wary of being outvoted on questions of constitutional and strategic significance, standard QMV at this scope may feel insufficiently reassuring. It is precisely this concern that motivates the model introduced below.

3.2 Consensus Like QMV Model

The Consensus like QMV model occupies the space between Full QMV and Dutch QMV. It is designed specifically to address the concern that broad application of QMV may expose EU Member States to the risk of being systematically outvoted on enlargement decisions of high political sensitivity. Under this model, QMV is extended to all intermediary stages – as under Full QMV – but is paired with a reinforced majority threshold and a structured blocking minority, drawing on the logic of Article 238(3) TFEU.

Concretely, decisions at intermediary stages would require 72% of Member States. In recognition of the particular concern that the population criterion may structurally disadvantage smaller Member States in a domain as politically sensitive as enlargement, this model derogates from the population requirement: a blocking minority would consist of at least four Member States, irrespective of the population they represent. This derogation finds its justification in the consensual spirit of Article 49 TEU and in the principle that enlargement, as a foundational act of the Union's political identity, must not be perceived as a majoritarian imposition. The model thus preserves the efficiency gains of broad QMV application while providing a meaningful and Treaty-grounded safeguard for Member States that might otherwise resist any departure from unanimity. Unanimity remains in place for the decision upon a membership application and closing of accession negotiations and for the ratification of the accession treaty.

3.3 Dutch QMV Model⁸

The Dutch QMV model reflects a more cautious and politically calibrated approach. Under this model, a shift from unanimity would apply to most intermediary stages of the accession process, including the opening of clusters, the adoption of opening and interim benchmarks in the Fundamentals cluster, and the closing of chapters with the exception of those under the First cluster. These decisions would be taken by super-qualified majority in accordance with Article 238(3) TFEU: 72% of Member States representing 65% of the EU population, applicable when the proposal does not originate from the Commission or the High Representative. This formula raises the threshold, ensures a broader consensus, and avoids the paralysis of full unanimity. By

contrast, decisions related to the closing of Fundamentals-related chapters would continue to require unanimity, reflecting their heightened political sensitivity, as well as where the treaties require it. In this way, the Dutch QMV model balances enhanced decision-making efficiency with reinforced safeguards where political reassurance is most critical.

3.4 QMV Lite

The QMV Lite model, inspired by the German-Slovenian non-paper⁹, is the most limited in scope. It introduces QMV only for **opening clusters and adopting opening benchmarks**, while leaving all chapter-closing steps – and the two treaty mandated decisions – under unanimity. It relies on **standard QMV** as defined in Article 16(4) TEU: 55% of Member States representing at least 65% of the EU population. This model is intended as politically the most feasible first step rather than a systemic overhaul, but it clearly falls short of fully addressing the problem of arbitrary obstruction by a single member state.

Together, these four models illustrate a continuum: from a comprehensive shift to QMV across all intermediary stages, to a targeted application limited to the earliest phases of the process. These threshold variations could be applied flexibly and differently combined. For example, under the Dutch QMV model, decisions related to the Fundamentals cluster could be shifted from unanimity to a Consensus Like model regime, providing stronger political safeguards while reducing the scope for unilateral obstruction. The models are not mutually exclusive templates but building blocks from which a politically viable reform architecture can be constructed.

⁸ This label is an analytical shorthand of the authors, taking into account that the Netherlands has traditionally been among the most protective and demanding when it comes to the Fundamentals cluster, insisting on strict conditionality and rigorous oversight. Moreover, the Commission itself considers the Fundamentals to be the core of the accession process, which is why this cluster is opened first and closed last in negotiations. The label is neither an official term used nor a model endorsed by the Dutch government.

⁹ The document was unofficially made available to the authors.

Comparison of Possible Decision-Making Models in Enlargement (Authors' Conceptual Design)

Model	Example Scope	Where Unanimity Remains	Voting Formula
Full QMV	All intermediary stages: opening/closing of all clusters and chapters; adoption of opening, interim, and closing benchmarks	Decisions on membership application and on terms of accession; ratification of accession treaty	Standard QMV (55% MS / 65% population) – Art. 16(4) TEU
Consensus Like QMV	All intermediary stages: opening/closing of all clusters and chapters; adoption of opening, interim, and closing benchmarks	Decisions on membership application and on terms of accession; ratification of accession treaty	Reinforced QMV (72% MS / no population requirement / blocking minority of 4 MS) – derogation inspired by Art. 238(3) TFEU
Dutch QMV	All intermediary stages with the exception of the closing of all Fundamentals-related chapters	Decisions on membership application and on terms of accession; ratification of accession treaty; closing of all Fundamentals chapters	Super QMV (72% MS / 65% population) – Art. 238(3) TFEU
QMV Lite (<i>German-Slovenian Non-Paper</i>)	Limited to opening clusters and adoption of opening benchmarks	Decisions on membership application and on terms of accession; ratification of accession treaty; closing of chapters	Standard QMV (55% MS / 65% population) – Art. 16(4) TEU

4. Council Voting Math and Population Thresholds

Any discussion on streamlining the decision-making process in enlargement must also be grounded in how decisions are taken in the Council. The Treaties establish the so-called double-majority rule: both a minimum number of states and a minimum share of the EU population must support a decision. This ensures that neither large nor small states alone can dominate the process.

Coalition-building remains indispensable under the double-majority system, as even the largest Member States must cooperate with smaller and medium-sized partners to reach the 55% threshold. This preserves the influence of smaller states, which, through coalition formation, are able to determine outcomes in finely balanced situations. The requirement that a blocking minority comprise at least four Member States representing more than 35% of the EU population further safeguards pluralism by ensuring that no small group of large states can unilaterally obstruct decision-making.

In the enlargement context, this balance is particularly relevant: the introduction of majority voting would not sideline smaller Member States but rather embed them more firmly within decision-shaping coalitions, combining institutional efficiency with broad-based legitimacy. These dynamics be-

come even more pronounced under the reinforced qualified majority formula of Article 238(3) TFEU – the Super QMV threshold of 72% of Member States representing 65% of the population – where securing either a winning or a blocking coalition necessitates an even wider constellation of Member States. This is the threshold on which the Dutch QMV model is built, and it is grounded in an explicit Treaty provision applicable precisely when the Council does not act on a Commission or High Representative proposal, which speaks directly to the specificity of enlargement decisions.

An additional layer of reassurance is provided by the Consensus Like QMV model introduced above. Rather than applying the population criterion – which may structurally disadvantage smaller Member States on questions as politically sensitive as enlargement – this model derogates from the population requirement and instead sets a blocking minority of at least four Member States, irrespective of the population they represent. This derogation is not arbitrary: it reflects the consensual spirit of Article 49 TEU and ensures that a sufficiently broad coalition of Member States, rather than a demographically weighted majority, remains the anchor of legitimacy for enlargement decisions. Under this design, consensus remains the primary mode of decision-making, and the majority threshold functions not as a tool to push decisions through over meaningful opposition, but as a safeguard against isolated or unrelated vetoes that enjoy no broader political support. As such, the Consensus Like QMV model is particularly well suited to intermediary

enlargement decisions where political sensitivity is high, but prolonged deadlock would undermine the credibility and momentum of the process as a whole.

To illustrate how this would work in practice, we draw on an actual case: the decision to open the *Fundamentals cluster with Ukraine*. Hungary, under Prime Minister Orbán, has openly blocked this step and shows no sign of lifting its veto. In response, European Council President António Costa has been actively exploring the use of QMV as a means of upgrading the decision-making process and allowing the Union to move forward on this file. The table below illustrates how a hypothetical decision supported by 26 Member States and opposed by one – Hungary – would be treated under each of the four voting arrangements explored above.

Scenario Table: Opening Fundamentals Cluster for Ukraine¹⁰

Model	Example Coalition	Threshold Check	Outcome
Unanimity (current practice)	26 in favor; 1 opposed 	Requires 27/27 → not met	✗ Blocked
Full QMV	26 in favor; 1 opposed 	Requires 55% MS / 65% population → 96.3% MS / 97.9% population → met	✓ Passes
Consensus Like QMV	26 in favor; 1 opposed 	Requires 72% MS / no population criterion / blocking minority of 4 MS → 96.3% MS / 1 MS opposed → not a blocking minority → met	✓ Passes
Dutch QMV	26 in favor; 1 opposed 	Requires 72% MS / 65% population → 96.3% MS / 97.9% population → met	✓ Passes
QMV Lite (German-Slovenian non paper)	26 in favor; 1 opposed 	Requires 55% MS / 65% population → 96.3% MS / 97.9% population → met	✓ Passes

Under **unanimity**, which governs current practice for most intermediary steps of the enlargement process, this configuration fails entirely. The requirement of agreement by all 27 Member States means that a single dissenting voice is sufficient to block the step, regardless of how overwhelming the majority in favour may be. In the present case, Hungary's objection alone is sufficient to prevent the opening of the Fundamentals cluster with Ukraine, notwithstanding the immensely strong support of 26 Member States. This

is the structural deficiency that the models below seek to address.

Under the Full QMV model, the same coalition would comfortably meet the applicable threshold. Applying standard QMV as defined in Article 16(4) TEU – 55% of Member States representing 65% of the EU population – the coalition of 26 represents 96.3% of Member States and 97.9% of the EU population, far exceeding both requirements. The opposition of a single EU Member State would be insufficient to prevent adoption. The decision would pass.

Under the Consensus like QMV model, the decision would equally be adopted, but under a more demanding and specifically calibrated threshold. This model requires 72% of Member States and, crucially, derogates from the population criterion, replacing it with a blocking minority of at least four member states irrespective of population. With 26 Member States in favour and only one opposed, the blocking minority threshold of four Member States is

not met. Hungary's objection, standing alone, carries no blocking force under this arrangement. The decision would therefore pass, while the structural safeguard of the four-state blocking minority remains fully intact for scenarios where opposition is broader and more politically significant.

Under the Dutch QMV model, the opening of the Fundamentals cluster would be subject to the reinforced qualified majority threshold of Article 238(3) TFEU. The coal-

¹⁰ In making the calculations, the authors used population data (as of 01.01.2023) from the Eurostat based on the calculator from Ehin, P. & Eelma, T. (2023). EU30+ voting calculator: modeling Council votes after enlargement. University of Tartu and the Government Office of Estonia. <https://euvote.ut.ee>

tion of 26 represents 96.3% of Member States and 97.9% of the EU population, clearly and comfortably exceeding the required threshold of 72% of Member States representing 65% of the population. The decision would be adopted. It is worth noting that even under this more demanding formula – designed precisely to provide additional reassurance to member states concerned about being outvoted – Hungary's isolated veto would carry no legal weight.

Under the QMV Lite model, which introduces qualified majority voting for the opening of clusters and the adoption of opening benchmarks, the decision would be subject to standard QMV under Article 16(4) TEU. The coalition of 26 far exceeds the requirement of 55% of Member States representing 65% of the Union's population. The decision would pass. While this model is the most limited in scope, it is sufficient to resolve precisely this type of situation – a single member state blocking an early-stage procedural decision that commands near-universal support.

Taken together, these numerical examples lay bare the structural consequences of the current unanimity practice: a single objection can override a consensus of 26 Member States, irrespective of the political, strategic, or reform-related merits of the decision at hand. Under all four QMV models examined, the outcome is identical – the decision passes – and it is only under the current rigid unanimity practice that the outcome diverges. The comparison does not argue that majority voting is without political costs or that member state concerns are without merit. It does, however, demonstrate that all four models are capable of preserving broad-based legitimacy while eliminating the risk of paralysis at critical intermediary steps of the enlargement process. The choice between them is ultimately a political one, turning on how much reassurance Member States require and how much efficiency the Union is willing to sacrifice in its pursuit of that reassurance.

5. The Paradox: How to Secure Unanimity to Curtail Unanimity

The current debate on decision-making in enlargement is framed too often in binary terms: either unanimity or qualified majority voting. This black-and-white framing overlooks the fact that a wide spectrum of intermediate solutions exists. In practice, there are numerous variations, safeguards, and combinations of scopes on which Member States could agree. There are, so to speak, *fifty shades of*

grey between full unanimity and full QMV, and this paper contributes to illustrating those options.

The opponents of streamlining the decision making in EU enlargement are concerned about losing full control of the process. For some, unanimity prevents the prospect of being outvoted when candidate countries are, in their own assessment, not fully prepared for the next step. A more consistent approach preserving the integrity of the accession process requires a nuanced balance between strictness and fairness, avoiding both unjustified progress and unrelated stagnation. The concerns of these Member States might be addressed by excluding the core issues from QMV – such as the closing of chapters under the Fundamental cluster in line with the proposed Dutch QMV model. Also, the high threshold of the Consensus Like model may provide for a sufficient measure of assurance.

A central motivation for opposing QMV is the desire of some Member States to preserve leverage over their neighbouring candidate countries – leverage they consider necessary to resolve bilateral issues on their own terms. Such blockages have devastating impact upon the conditionality principle and the overall credibility of the accession process. When enlargement policy is misused to impose a solution to a bilateral dispute, the process stalls regardless of the reform performance of the candidate country in question, becoming not only inefficient but plainly unfair. Given the consensus-seeking culture of EU decision-making and the prevailing solidarity between fellow Member States, any substantiated, reasonable interest of a member state toward a candidate country would suffice to prevent the required qualified majority and block further progress. What QMV does eliminate, therefore, is not legitimate influence, but the routine weaponisation of the veto for domestic political considerations that have no connection to the accession criteria, and that, in some cases, actively contravene European values and principles. In practice, moreover, excessive unilateral leverage has often proven counterproductive: absolute veto power encourages maximalist positions and asymmetric outcomes that may secure short-term concessions but rarely produce durable settlements. Limiting unilateral veto power does not eliminate influence – it reshapes it. Under QMV, bilateral concerns must be articulated in a way that persuades other Member States and aligns with commonly agreed accession criteria, shifting dispute resolution away from coercion and toward compromise, and increasing the likelihood that outcomes are politically balanced, socially acceptable, and sustainable over time.

As noted by Christophe Hillion, the increasing nationalization of enlargement policy raises concerns about Member States' compliance with their obligations under EU law, including the duty of sincere cooperation in Article 4(3) TEU, which requires them not to undermine the Union's objectives in the accession process.¹¹ In this context, it is legally conceivable albeit politically difficult to envisage, to seek legal remedies before the European Court of Justice, especially in view of the "continued importance of enlargement as a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity."¹²

Finally, moving to qualified majority voting in enlargement will not happen through procedural argument alone; it requires a political coalition anchored in a broader bargain. Progress is therefore most likely if QMV is embedded in a wider package that redistributes reassurance and influence across files. This could include a calibrated introduction of QMV at intermediary stages, reinforced safeguards on fundamentals, and parallel compromises in adjacent dossiers where unanimity has become a constraint. Framing QMV as a collective investment in the credibility and sustainability of enlargement rather than a zero-sum transfer of leverage can help shift the debate. By preserving unanimity for decisive political moments while reducing the scope for unilateral vetoes, such a package can make QMV not only legally feasible, but politically acceptable to a broad coalition of Member States.

Whatever the reasoning behind sticking to unanimity on enlargement, moving to QMV, even with the broadest possible scope, does not relinquish control over the two most important political decisions in the process: no country can become a candidate and will never become a member state without all EU Member States agreeing.

Conclusion

The debate on decision-making in enlargement is not a procedural refinement. It is a strategic necessity. Unanimity, originally designed to secure consensus, has mutated into a structural vulnerability, one that any single member state can exploit, for any reason, at any moment. In a geopolitical landscape shaped by Russia's war of aggression, mounting global competition, and persistent instability on the Union's borders, the cost of that vulnerability is no longer abstract. It is measured in stalled accession processes, eroded credibility, and lost strategic opportunities.

This paper has shown that the alternative is neither radical nor legally complex. Introducing qualified majority voting at intermediary stages is feasible within the existing Treaty architecture, consistent with choices already made by member states in the current negotiating frameworks, and adaptable to a wide range of political preferences. The models presented here are not blueprints imposed from outside — they are built from the inside, on the foundations that member states themselves have laid.

The Union has the tools. The frameworks exist. The legal path is open. What remains is the political choice: whether enlargement is treated in reality as the strategic priority it is declared to be, or whether that declaration continues to be contradicted, one veto at a time.

11 Christophe Hillion, *The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU Enlargement Policy*, European Policy Analysis No. 6 (Stockholm: Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, 2010).

12 European Council, *European Council Conclusions*, 18 December 2025, EUCO 24/25.



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About the organisations:

Balkan Center for Constructive Policies Solution - Skopje is a non-profit think-and-do tank bridging research and grassroots action. It is dedicated to completing the European integration of the Western Balkans and partners with engaged citizens in proposing and advocating for systemic reforms.

Think Europe is an independent center for researching and co-shaping European policies, with a focus on institutional affairs, Slovenia's position within the EU, and the future of Europe and the Western Balkans within it. Through research, expert proposals, and education of the public and private sectors, it actively contributes to understanding and developing European integration. Through communication campaigns, it connects researchers, public officials, and the broader public for a sustainable future of the region and an inclusive European community.

Institut für Europäische Politik is a non-profit, non-partisan organisation concerned with European integration. Situated in Berlin, it is one of the leading foreign and European policy research institutions in the Federal Republic of Germany.

ERSTE Foundation is a philanthropic foundation and focuses its activities on Financial Health as well as strengthening democratic values and principles. As core shareholder of Erste Group, it safeguards the independence of one of the biggest banking groups in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe.

