

1. What is the issue?

In September 2026, Marta Kos announced the "autumn of enlargement". Still, we have learned, yet again, that enlargement is anything but an easy sell. The publication of the pre-enlargement policy review (6 October 2026), the European Council meeting (15 October 2026), the enlargement package (planned for 4 November 2026) and the EU Enlargement Forum (15/16 November 2026) mark important milestones in the EU's enlargement policy. However, as it now stands, none of these events will move EU accession a substantive step forward. The major challenge for enlargement policy is again the lack of political will among national governments. The EU needs to find an answer to four challenges to achieve progress in the enlargement process:

First, the challenge of speed relates to the geopolitical and modernisation logic that drive this policy. While containment of Russian expansionism and the protection of European values require fast accession, the modernisation logic's merit-based approach is a lengthy procedure as it allows progress only when candidate countries reform.

The *second* challenge results from the enlargement policy's credibility. During their 20 years at the EU's doorstep, citizens in the Western Balkans have lost trust in the credibility of their accession perspective. Both bilateral conflicts with member states and concerns that Moldova's and Ukraine's accession to the EU might get fast-tracked have amplified this perception.

The EU's absorption capacity is the *third* challenge. The Union's last reform was drafted more than 23 years ago in a fundamentally different world. In spite of numerous reform proposals such as the report of the Franco-German Expert Group, appetite for reforming the EU is low among EU member states.

Finally, there is the *fourth* challenge of a fading political momentum for enlargement as the EU is facing a series of major national elections in 2027. As war fatigue grows and radically Eurosceptic extremist parties gain influence in the EU, the window of opportunity for enlargement that opened widely in 2022 might be closing soon.

This summer, a series of non-papers and other contributions have proposed solutions to address these four challenges: *Gradual integration* is a means of speeding up integration of candidate countries and making the EU's enlargement pledge trustworthy again by offering tangible benefits in the short-term perspective. *Reversibility* allows reconciling the geopolitical with the modernisation logic and addresses national concerns with regard to candidate countries' reform reliability. *Institutional safeguard clauses* are a substitute for the lack of reforms aimed at strengthening the EU's capacity to act, while *transitory provisions* accommodate member states' opposition to enlargement in certain policy areas

.2. What is Germany's position on this?

In Germany, Euroscepticism has not undermined the government's support for enlargement, even though extremist parties on the right (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), and less so on the post-communist left, (Bündnis Soziale Gerechtigkeit und Wirtschaftliche Vernunft, BSW), are shaking up the German party system. The former recommends all candidate countries refrain from joining "the Brussels Dictatorship" and the latter calls for a moratorium on enlargement.

The democratic political parties and the German government support enlargement. The idea of German Chancellor Friedrich Merz for "associate membership" for Ukraine and "substantial steps on their way to membership" for other candidate countries clearly bolsters gradual integration. So too does the Franco-German non-paper written on the German side by the Federal Foreign Office. This is also reflected at the party level in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Green Party. The Left Party (Die Linke) alone criticises a "privileged partnership" or "two-speed Europe" and calls for full membership.

For the government, the principle of reversibility is a key element. The Chancellor's letter to the heads of EU institutions proposes a "snap-back mechanism (alternatively a sunset-clause)". The Franco-German non-paper considers all steps of gradual integration to be reversable and the non-paper of five member states (Belgium, France, Germany, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands) proposes sectoral safeguards, transitional provisions and institutional safeguards for future accession treaties.

The need to establish the principle of reversibility enjoys wide consensus in the German debate. The Social Democratic and Green political groups in the Bundestag both recently tabled papers with concrete proposals on how the principle of reversibility could be implemented. The SPD proposed a reform of the Article-7-procedure, while the Greens underlined the less-for-less principle and proposed different safeguard clauses. The Left Party is even more critical than the other parties, assuming the EU is aiming for enlargement progress for geopolitical and economic reasons and ready to dilute social, rule of law and democratic standards.

For the German government, the EU's absorption capacity is a prerequisite for enlargement. Thus, the accession processes and the "internal consolidation and reform of the EU" should happen in parallel. Specifically, it proposed observers in EU institutions before accession, a temporary reform of the Article-7-procedure and limiting the voting rights of new member states. Beyond these ideas, the German government only called upon the Commission to make reform proposals. Despite following different ideological reasonings, all democratic parties in Germany agree on the necessity of reforming the EU and making decision-making more efficient. In general, there is no appetite for reform. Where reforms within the treaties are not sufficient, the idea of using accession treaties for limited reforms is supported.

Concerning concrete steps forward in the enlargement process, Chancellor Merz was frank in saying that "[i]t is time for [Montenegro's] accession to the European Union" after praising the country's reform progress in June 2026. In the run up to the European Council in October 2026, he also took the initiative together with French President Emmanuel Macron in pushing for the country's accession. His second journey to Montenegro this year for the summit of the Berlin Process on 22 October, where he reiterated his assessment of June, might be a signal that the German government is starting to invest more in building support for a mini accession to come soon. Meanwhile, the Chancellor is also still waiting for a substantial response to his idea of "associate membership" from the Ukrainian government – aside from the rejection of the terminology.

For the German public, enlargement is a topic of low salience and Montenegro is the only candidate country with support for membership by a slim margin (46 percent in favour compared to 45 percent against) in the German public. All other candidate countries face a plurality of Germans opposing their membership.

3. Recommendations to the German Government

Against this background, the challenges for Germany's position regarding the EU's enlargement policy are two-fold in the short-term perspective. There is the need to build political momentum among national governments in the EU to support rapid progress in the EU's enlargement policy as long as the window of opportunity is open. Additionally, the German government has to prepare for winning the support of German citizens and countering the anti-EU campaigns of political extremists to secure ratification in Germany.

The short-term perspective and mini enlargement

The Irish Presidency should close the remaining chapters in the negotiations with Montenegro, and the European Commission should finalise the accession treaty seeking signature as early as possible. Such a mini enlargement would send a clear geopolitical signal and strengthen the credibility of the EU enlargement pledge, especially in the countries of the Western Balkan. The provisional application of parts of the treaty, giving Montenegro e.g. observer status in the EU institutions, would show immediately that EU enlargement works in practice.

To achieve a mini enlargement, German EU policy should be energised and use minilateral formats to organise

support for enlargement. Building a coalition with the "Friends of the Western Balkans" and additional supportive member states would be an approach suited to convince reluctant national governments to support Montenegro's accession. The German Chancellor's close relationship with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni could be used to establish the coalition, at least before the upcoming elections in Italy.

German EU policy should use package deals to facilitate EU enlargement policy. This way, Germany would receive a double return on its investment by using policies, which are anyway in its own interest, as a lever in enlargement policy: The ongoing negotiations for the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) offer considerable leverage to win over reluctant countries from South-Western Europe, which support a larger EU budget. Most notably, this could be a way of overcoming French reluctance, which remains a key obstacle to the EU's enlargement. Furthermore, German defence policy and its clear support for Ukraine can be a lever for advancing support for Montenegro's accession in North-Eastern Europe, where the Western Balkan is of low salience.

German EU policy should also start to build an enlargement coalition in Germany by gathering pro-enlargement stakeholders. Such a coalition of interest groups, pro-European civil society, diaspora groups and democratic political parties should be empowered to develop campaigns in support of enlargement. These campaigns need to develop a positive narrative with target-group-specific arguments to bring the candidate countries closer to the German public. They also need to debunk fake news about EU enlargement and the candidate countries and prepare for countering anti-EU campaigns by extremists and malign foreign actors.

The medium-term perspective and maintaining the momentum

In the medium-term perspective, the major challenge for Germany's positioning on the EU's enlargement policy is the fading momentum and the potentially less favourable political context within the EU following the upcoming elections throughout Europe. German European policy should already prepare for this situation now.

In the framework of Germany's clear commitment to Ukraine, the German government should overcome any terminological difficulties and constructively work with the Ukrainian government on a concrete proposal for Ukraine's interim closer association with the EU. Considering the ongoing war in the country, the gradual integration path for Ukraine is most likely fundamentally different from that of the other candidate countries. Still, there is a need for a different term – avoid calling it "associate membership".

Building on its non-papers, the German government should table a proposal for a comprehensive governance framework for gradual integration, including safeguards to ensure the principle of reversibility. This way, the government could give additional impetus to the Council assessment of the Commission's pre-enlargement policy review, which is necessary to speed up the process. To this end, the German government should work closely with the upcoming Lithuanian Council presidency.

Assuming that the enlargement round after the mini enlargement of Montenegro might encompass a group of candidate countries with a greater effect on the EU's capacity to act, the German government should consider proposing institutional reforms via the accession treaties.

In parallel, the German government should work on a second set of reforms, which can be reached by using provisions within the EU Treaties, such as extending the use of QMV. This set should be adopted together with the signature of the second next enlargement treaty. This set of limited reforms of the primary law should be accompanied by a second set of reforms within the treaties, that would be adopted in parallel with the signature of the second next enlargement treaty.

About the authors
Julian Plottka is Scientific Senior Project Manager at the Institut für Europäische Politik in Berlin.

Prof Dr Funda Tekin is Director of Institut für Europäische Politik and Honorary Professor at the Universität Tübingen.

About Berlin Perspectives
The policy brief series is published by the Institut für Europäische Politik and provides precise analyses and policy recommendations for German European policy on current issues and debates.

About IEP
Since 1959, the IEP has been active in the field of European integration as a non-profit organisation. It is one of Germany's leading research institutes on foreign and European policy. IEP works at the intersection of academia, politics, administration, and civic education. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEP.

Publisher
Daniel Hegedüs

Editorial team
Jakob Burger, SANDSTONE GbR

Layout
Julia Winter

ISSN: 2701-3014
This text is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution- Non Commercial- No Derivatives 4.0 International.

iep

Institut für Europäische Politik e. V.
Bundesallee 23
10717 Berlin

info@iep-berlin.de
www.iep-berlin.de

InvigoratEU
Invigorating Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy for a Resilient Europe

Supported by

Federal Foreign Office

Funded by the European Union