

The EU's Coupling- Decoupling Dilemma

Reconciling Strategic Unity
with Merit-Based
Accession

Abstract

Two decades after the EU's last major enlargements, accession remains a strategic priority. This paper examines the underexplored practice of political coupling, where candidate countries are procedurally linked to signal unity, foster cooperation, and streamline accession. While historically effective in the Baltics, coupling has hardened into rigid dependency in some cases where delays for one partner stall the other. To resolve this, the paper proposes a three-part strategy: (1) formal time limits on political coupling to prevent hardening dependencies; (2) context-sensitive, looser procedural models to allow differentiated progress while maintaining unity; and (3) institutionalised strategic mentorship, including a Security and Strategic Alignment Taskforce for Ukraine and Moldova, to stabilise reforms, coordinate positions on strategic issues, and project a unified EU message.



Sofia Mørch

Governance and
Enlargement Fellow,
European Liberal Forum

Introduction

Nearly two decades after the European Union's (EU) last enlargement rounds in 2004 and 2007, enlargement is once again high on the EU's strategic agenda due to Russia's war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical shifts. This renewed urgency is evident in both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) regions making tangible strides towards EU accession, with Montenegro being the closest to completing accession negotiations.

Yet the EU and the process itself are now at a crossroads between two competing imperatives: regional solidarity and unity on the one hand, and the merit-based, individual progress that has long been central to the credibility of the enlargement process on the other. One of the most consequential yet underexamined practices where this tension is apparent is the contemporary model of political coupling, whereby candidate countries are grouped together and treated as a unit during key milestones of the accession process.¹

Coupling has liberal foundations: it can foster regional cooperation, fair treatment, positive competition, and a unified geopolitical message, and it can reduce the EU's institutional burden in treaty change. In its earlier, loose form, as seen with the Baltic states, it balanced these aims with meritocracy, allowing faster movers to advance while still being seen as part of a united group. Over time, however, the EU has hardened the practice into a prolonged tight procedural dependency, where high-performing candidates are stalled by partners facing political blockages, disputes, or vetoes, effectively equating unity with moving in lockstep at every stage. This tight form of coupling undermines the merit-based enlargement policy model which is central to Renew Europe and the ALDE Party's enlargement agenda.

Coupling has liberal foundations: it can foster regional cooperation, fair treatment, positive competition, and a unified geopolitical message, and it can reduce the EU's institutional burden in treaty change. In its earlier, loose form, as seen with the Baltic states, it balanced these aims with meritocracy, allowing faster

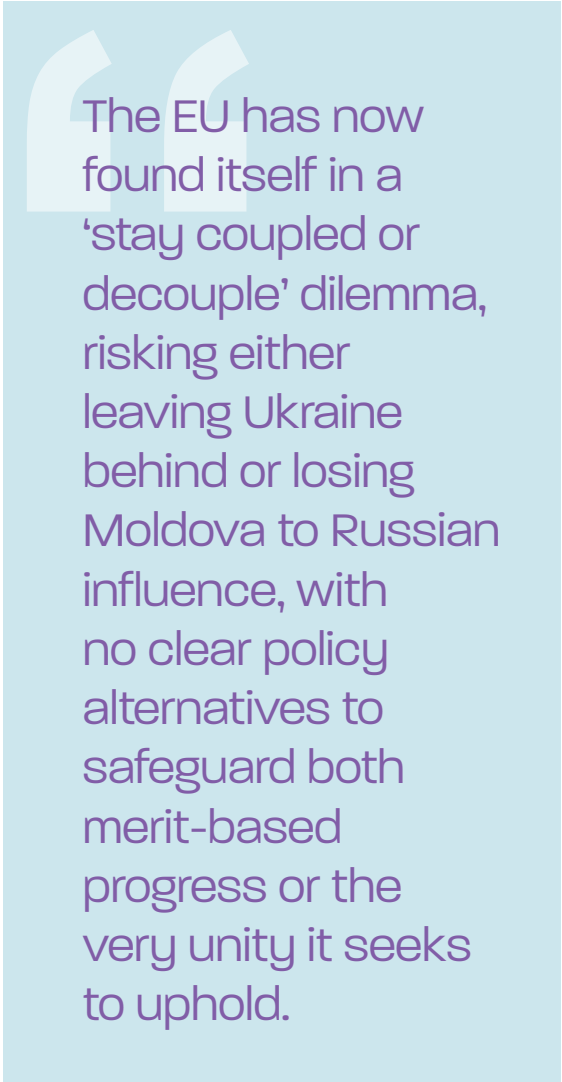
¹ This paper does not rely on an official EU definition of 'coupling' as no such definition exists. Instead, the concept is drawn from empirical cases where candidate countries have been grouped together at various stages of the enlargement process. Importantly, the degree to which these countries have been treated as a unit has shifted over time, and tracing these shifts is a central focus of the analysis.

movers to advance while still being seen as part of a united group. Over time, however, the EU has hardened the practice into a prolonged tight procedural dependency, where high-performing candidates are stalled by partners facing political blockages, disputes, or vetoes, effectively equating unity with moving in lockstep at every stage. This tight form of coupling undermines the merit-based enlargement policy model which is central to Renew Europe and the ALDE Party's enlargement agenda.²

Tools such as gradual integration, similar to staged integration as highlighted in a previous European Liberal Forum publication by Dr Maria Alesina,³ has been employed to reinstate the merit-based logic, such as in the case of Ukraine–Moldova. While Moldova has made significant strides in reforms using gradual integration such as in trade, the single market, energy, and digital policy, its accession will remain constrained by its coupling with Ukraine. These prolonged delays or perceptions of EU disengagement risk undermining reform incentives, public trust, and opening Moldova to Russian influence, directly threatening European security and Ukraine's stability. At the same time, while decoupling could restore merit-based logic, Ukraine's accession is a key security guarantee: separating Moldova risks rewarding Hungary's veto, undermining EU credibility, and weakening strategic unity.

Hence, the EU has now found itself in a 'stay coupled or decouple' dilemma, risking either leaving Ukraine behind or losing Moldova to Russian influence, with no clear policy alternatives to safeguard both merit-based progress or the very unity it seeks to uphold.

With today's current geopolitical urgency, coupling cannot remain a zero-sum trap; it must be reframed to balance the merit-based principles of enlargement while providing alternative mechanisms to convey a unified EU message.



The EU has now found itself in a 'stay coupled or decouple' dilemma, risking either leaving Ukraine behind or losing Moldova to Russian influence, with no clear policy alternatives to safeguard both merit-based progress or the very unity it seeks to uphold.

² ALDE Party (2024), 'Your Europe, Your Freedom: Delivering Change for You – ALDE Party 2024 Manifesto', <https://www.aldeparty.eu/vision-manifestos>.

³ M. Alesina (2022), 'Staged Integration for Future EU Enlargement', European Liberal Forum, <https://liberalforum.eu/updates/publication/policy-paper-20-staged-integration-for-future-eu-enlargement/>.

This paper therefore argues that, given the urgency of integrating new members due to the inseparable link between EU enlargement and European security, three key reforms are proposed. First, introducing a formal time limit on procedural coupling to prevent blockages from hardening into rigid dependencies. Second, reframe coupling by transitioning to looser procedural models, similar to the Baltic States, that enable differentiated advancement. This includes asymmetric or cluster-based progression, thus upholding solidarity and unity without undermining the merit-based principle of accession. Finally, institutionalising strategic mentorship to support countries facing delays, stabilise reform trajectories, and reduce political and reform fatigue during periods of divergence or deadlock.

Coupling: Origins and the shifts in its purpose

The practice of coupling – strategically linking candidate countries – emerged informally in the 1990s and became more politically visible during the 2004 and 2007 accession waves. Despite its recurring use, no official framework defines when or how countries should be coupled, a notable gap in both policy and scholarship that leaves practitioners without tools to assess its legitimacy, consistency, or impact. Decisions to couple countries are not grounded in EU law, treaties, or formal Council votes but are instead shaped by political consensus in broader negotiations between the Commission and Council, in consultation with Member States.⁴ While coupling has been employed for diverse purposes – signalling unity, fostering stability, overcoming blockages, and streamlining negotiations – the rationale and forms of coupling have varied across time, with countries linked at different stages of accession.

Types of coupling (1994–2025)

1. Loose coupling

An early case of loose coupling is that of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). Realising that separate paths would slow their mutual goal of EU accession, the three countries coordinated their political endeavours,

⁴ European Council (2025), 'How EU Enlargement Works', European Council – Council of the European Union, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/how-enlargement-works/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#Enlargement.

while the EU likewise treated them as a single entity to strengthen regional cooperation, project a unified message, and streamline enlargement.⁵ Through the discourse of 'the Baltic States', as well as joint programmes and agreements, the EU framed them as a unified group. Key accords such as the Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreements (1993) and Europe (Association) Agreements (1998) were applied simultaneously, reflecting the EU's view that closer regional ties would smooth their path to accession.⁶ This was reinforced by EU and NATO security initiatives, including BALTBAT, BALTNET, and BALTRON, as well as the PHARE programme, complemented by Nordic mentorship programmes offering training, policy guidance, and advice.⁷ This enabled the Baltics to apply for EU membership in 1995 and gain candidate status by December 1997 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Enlargement of the EU, 2004 to 2013

	Membership Application	EU candidate status	Start of negotiations	Joined EU
Malta	July 1990	October 1993	February 2000	May 2004
Cyprus	July 1990	October 1993	March 1994	May 2004
Hungary	March 1994	December 1997	March 1994	May 2004
Poland	April 1994	December 1997	March 1994	May 2004
Romania	June 1995	December 1997	February 2000	January 2007
Slovakia	June 1995	December 1997	February 2000	May 2004
Latvia	October 1995	December 1997	February 2000	May 2004
Estonia	November 1995	December 1997	March 1998	May 2004
Lithuania	December 1995	December 1997	February 2000	May 2004
Bulgaria	December 1995	December 1997	February 2000	January 2007

⁵ A. Westin (1998), 'The Baltic Countries and Accession to the European Union', in International Monetary Fund, The Baltic Countries, chapter 7, <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781557757388.084>; Z. Ozolina (1999), 'The Impact of the European Union on Baltic Co-operation', Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/ozz01/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#note4.

⁶ Westin (1998); Ozolina (1999).

⁷ Ozolina (1999); Westin (1998).

Czechia	January 1996	December 1997	March 1998	May 2004
Slovenia	June 1996	December 1997	March 1998	May 2004
Croatia	February 2003	June 2004	October 2005	July 2013

Source: European Union (2007), 'The 2004 Enlargement: The Challenge of a 25-member EU', <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/the-2004-enlargement-the-challenge-of-a-25-member-eu.html>.

Overall, the EU's decision to prioritise Estonia to move forward, shifted the Baltic states from being procedurally bound together into a form of loose coupling based on merit and readiness while retaining the functioning 1990s cooperation programmes.

While the three countries were viewed as a unified group to enhance their influence and accelerate accession, the Baltics themselves emphasised throughout the process the importance of evaluating each state on its own individual merits. Estonia, which was more advanced in economic and administrative reforms, argued that its economic achievements, and not its geopolitical aspects, must take priority in its timeline. Although the Commission was initially reluctant to differentiate, differences in reform progress implied that individual assessments by the EU were necessary.⁸

Later in 1997, the Commission recommended that 'negotiation for accession should be opened with Estonia',⁹ noting that Latvia and Lithuania could begin once they met the Copenhagen criteria. Although this temporarily generated tensions, with Riga and Vilnius fearing that Estonia's lead might undermine Baltic unity and investment flows, Tallinn reassured its neighbours that those regional initiatives would continue uninterrupted.¹⁰ More importantly, Estonia's rapid progress generated a

pull effect, driving Latvia and Lithuania to accelerate reforms while sustaining core Baltic cooperation programmes.¹¹ Both countries subsequently joined accession negotiations in 1999, and by 2004 all three entered the EU, as Brussels wanted collective enlargement to preserve their symbolic unity as a regional trio.¹²

⁸ Westin (1998).

⁹ European Commission (1997), 'Commission Opinion on Estonia's Application for Membership of the European Union', European Union, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/aed248df-1104-415e-b279-a372b63d0f80>.

¹⁰ Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009), 'Estonia's Way into the European Union', https://eu.mfa.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/09/Estonias_way_into_the_EU.pdf; Ozolina (1999).

¹¹ Ozolina (1999).

¹² Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009).

Overall, the EU's decision to prioritise Estonia to move forward, shifted the Baltic states from being procedurally bound together into a form of loose coupling based on merit and readiness while retaining the functioning 1990s cooperation programmes, ensuring that Baltic unity was not abandoned. The combination of differentiation and continued cooperation highlights how loose coupling can foster positive competition while preserving the symbolic and practical unity of a regional grouping throughout the accession process and upon EU entry.

2. Coupling with post-accession monitoring

A more politically binding form of coupling emerged with **Romania and Bulgaria**. From the outset, the EU treated them as a pair, reflecting their geographical proximity, similar levels of economic underdevelopment, and early reform challenges.¹³ By signing agreements, participating in programmes such as PHARE, and receiving candidate status in 1997 (**Table 1**), they were symbolically framed as a unified unit from the beginning, with parallel accession tracks reinforcing this cohesion.¹⁴

However, unlike the looser grouping of the Baltics, the EU kept them firmly together during accession stages through the use of conditionality. Both countries were judged unprepared to begin negotiations in 1997 due to weak rule of law, widespread corruption, and fragile administrative capacities, which ensured that neither could advance alone and reinforced their symbolic pairing. As they were invited to begin negotiations in 2000 under pressure from Member States and amid the Kosovo crisis, their paths began to diverge. Bulgaria moved forward with clearer economic stabilisation and reform momentum, while Romania lagged behind in judicial, administrative, and anti-corruption measures.

This divergence created mounting concern in Sofia that Bulgaria's accession might be delayed simply because of Romania's slower pace. Bulgarian leaders therefore pressed the EU to uphold the principle of differentiation and assess their country's candidacy on its own merits.¹⁵ The European Commission nonetheless maintained that both countries could complete negotiations by the end of 2004 and resisted decoupling to avoid unequal treatment, streamline the process, and preserve enlargement momentum after the 2004 wave.¹⁶ They

¹³ P. Nikolova (2006), 'Negotiating for EU Membership? The Case of Bulgaria and Romania', *Croatian Yearbook of European Law & Policy*, 2(1), 393–412.

¹⁴ G. Noutcheva & D. Bechev (2008), 'The Successful Laggards: Bulgaria and Romania's Accession to the EU', *East European Politics and Societies*, 22(1), 114–144.

¹⁵ G. Noutcheva & D. Bechev (2008).

¹⁶ Commission President Romano Prodi, cited in *Uniting Europe* (03/3/04).

pressured Romania to accelerate reforms by rewarding Bulgaria with incremental benefits such as earlier removal from the Schengen 'black' visa list in 2000, while warning that accession for both could be delayed unless Romania caught up.¹⁷ This conditionality also forced Sofia to pressure Bucharest, effectively binding Bulgaria's progress to Romania's performance.

The coupling of the two countries was later reinforced by the EU through post-accession monitoring. Although Bulgaria and Romania both opened negotiations in 2000, they only provisionally closed the chapters in 2004, as judicial, agricultural, regional policy, free movement, and anti-corruption reforms remained incomplete.¹⁸

To address these shortcomings, the 2005 Accession Treaty included postponement clauses that in theory allowed differentiation: delaying Bulgaria would require unanimity, while Romania could be postponed by qualified majority.¹⁹ Yet these clauses were never used and instead the Commission recommended admitting both in 2007 under a Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) to monitor their reform progress. In this way, even as their trajectories diverged, the EU ensured that Bulgaria and Romania remained bound together, with conditionality reshaped into monitoring to manage their integration after accession.

3. Tight coupling

This set a precedent for the coupling of Albania and North Macedonia which was more politically driven and procedurally tight. Initially, the two countries were treated separately in their EU accession processes. North Macedonia applied for membership in 2004 and gained candidate status in 2005, whereas Albania applied in 2009 and gained candidate status in 2014 (Table 2).

¹⁷ G. Noutcheva & D. Bechev (2008).

¹⁸ B. Aurescu (2005), 'The Impact of the Enlarged European Union on New Member States and Prospects for Further Enlargement', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania Substitute Member of the Venice Commission, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-UDT\(2005\)032-e](https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-UDT(2005)032-e); Novinite (2006), 'Timeline: Bulgaria and the EU', Novinite.com - Sofia News Agency, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/70184/Timeline%3A+Bulgaria+and+the+EU>.

¹⁹ G. Noutcheva & D. Bechev (2008).

Table 2: Applicants for EU membership, candidate status, and negotiations in 2024

	Date of Application	Date granted candidate status	Start of negotiations
Turkey	April 1987	December 1999	October 2005
North Macedonia	March 2004	December 2005	July 2022
Montenegro	December 2008	December 2010	June 2012
Serbia	December 2009	March 2012	January 2014
Albania	April 2009	June 2014	July 2022
Bosnia and Herzegovina	February 2016	December 2022	
Ukraine	February 2022	June 2022	
Moldova	March 2022	June 2022	
Georgia	March 2022	December 2023	
Kosovo	December 2022		

Source: European Union (2007).

However, while both countries pursued substantial reforms thereafter, external political blockages and divided Member States meant that neither could advance independently without broader consensus. North Macedonia ended a 30-year-long name dispute with Greece by signing the 2018 Prespa Agreement. However, when it wanted to launch negotiations in 2020, it was immediately blocked when Bulgaria vetoed North Macedonia's talks over historical and linguistic disagreements.²⁰ At the same time, political polarisation and a lack of government transparency in Albania remained unresolved, prompting EU Member States such as France, Denmark, and the Netherlands to reject the opening of Albania's accession negotiations.²¹

²⁰ I. Gabidzashvili (2021), 'European Policy Review: The EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans: Accession Negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania', European Student Think Tank, <https://esthinktank.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/EPR-vol2.2-2019-Interactive.pdf>.

²¹ I. Gabidzashvili (2021).

To maintain momentum, the Commission in 2022 explicitly bound the two together; sceptical governments agreed to advance Albania once North Macedonia was included, while Bulgaria lifted its veto after the French brokered a compromise on constitutional amendments in Skopje. Negotiations were launched for both in July 2022. However, the opening of chapters continued to be vetoed by the ongoing Sofia–Skopje dispute, effectively delaying Albania's progress despite its readiness.²² Unlike in the case of the Baltics, where countries could largely progress independently, delays in North Macedonia directly held back Albania for several years, creating real procedural interdependence.

Recognising this, and with no resolution in sight, the EU decided in 2024 to decouple the two tracks, allowing Albania to move forward independently once conditions for the first negotiation cluster were met.²³ This case illustrates a more politically and procedurally tight form of coupling, far heavier than the symbolic grouping of the Baltics, meaning the decoupling itself carried significant political weight.

4. Tight security coupling

Building on this precedent, coupling has been further tightened in the case of **Ukraine and Moldova**. Granted candidate status together in June 2022 and opening negotiations in June 2024, their accession processes were procedurally bound from the outset to streamline talks, signal unity, and shield Ukraine's bid from isolation during wartime (**Table 2**).²⁴ Both countries have currently made significant progress in the screening process and are ready to open the first negotiation chapter on Fundamentals.²⁵

However, as in the case of Albania and North Macedonia, Hungary's veto on opening Ukraine's accession chapters has also stalled Moldova's progress, effectively gatekeeping both at the chapter-opening stage. Yet it carries an

²² European Parliament (2019), 'Opening Accession Negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania', https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0050_EN.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com; I. Gabidzashvili (2021).

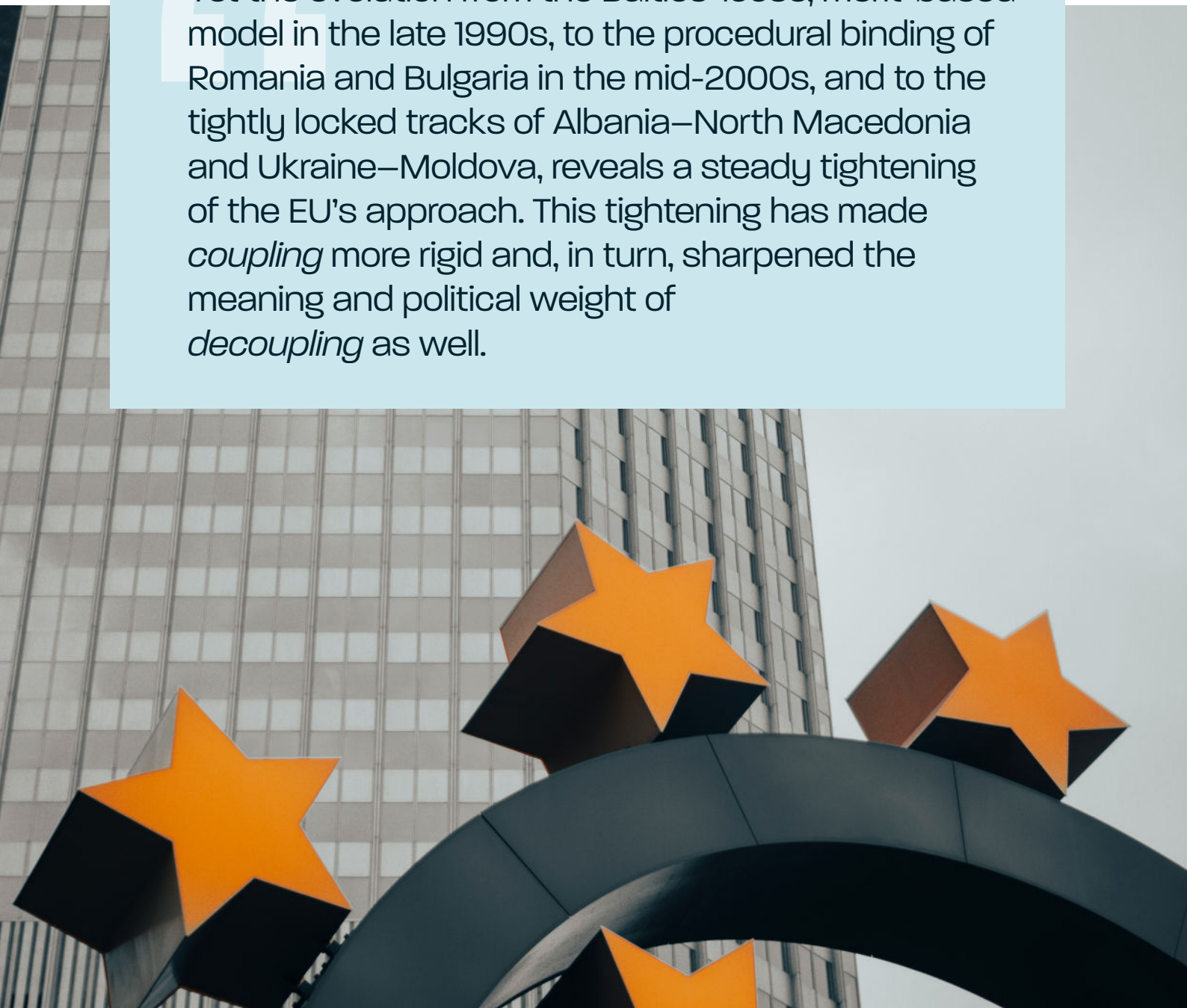
²³ A. Taylor-Braçe & G. Gotev (2024), 'Albania's EU Path Decoupled from North Macedonia while Skopje Remains in Limbo', *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albanias-eu-path-decoupled-from-north-macedonia-while-skopje-remains-in-limbo/>.

²⁴ Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (2024), 'Commission Adopts 2024 Enlargement Package', European Commission, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en.

²⁵ L. Litra (2024), 'Dreaming of EU: The Challenges Ahead for Ukraine's and Moldova's Accession', European Council on Foreign Relations, <https://ecfr.eu/article/dreaming-of-eu-the-challenges-ahead-for-ukraines-and-moldovas-accession/>.

added and more urgent security dimension, framed as part of the EU's support for Kyiv amid Russia's war, giving the procedural bond more political and symbolic weight. While the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, had earlier this year opened to the idea of decoupling with Moldova being ready to open the first cluster of membership negotiations, it has since been ruled out.²⁶

Yet the evolution from the Baltics' loose, merit-based model in the late 1990s, to the procedural binding of Romania and Bulgaria in the mid-2000s, and to the tightly locked tracks of Albania–North Macedonia and Ukraine–Moldova, reveals a steady tightening of the EU's approach. This tightening has made *coupling* more rigid and, in turn, sharpened the meaning and political weight of *decoupling* as well.



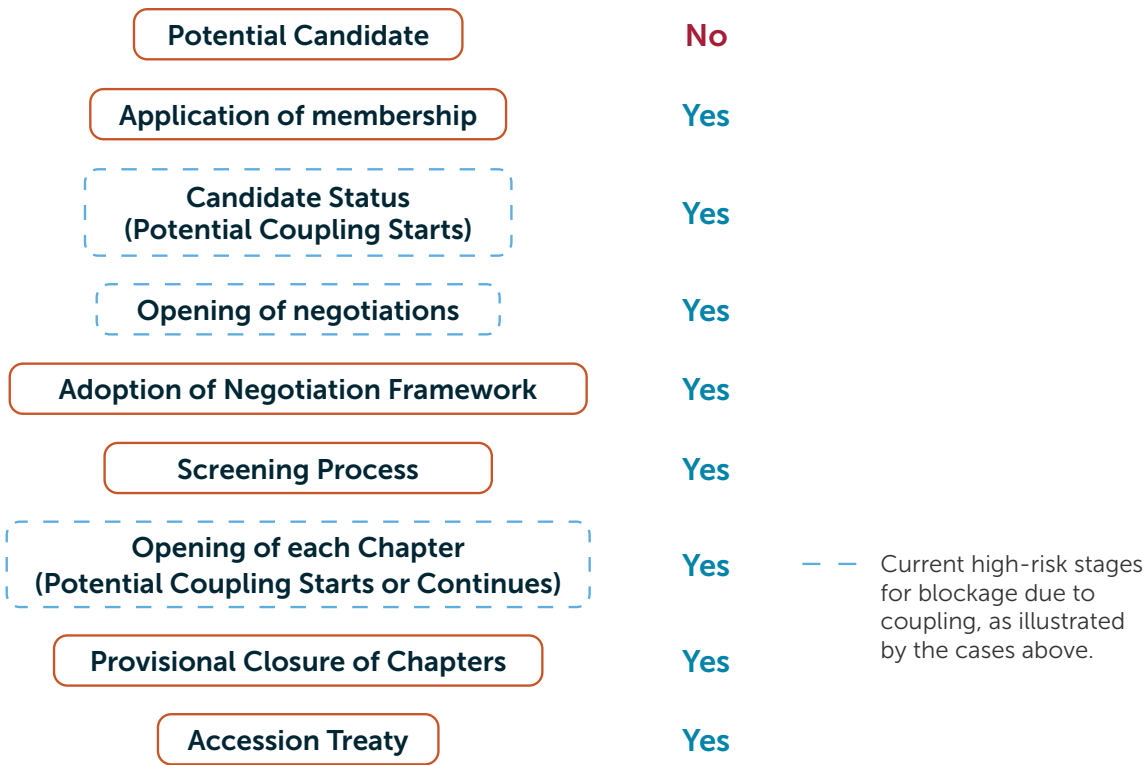
²⁶ R. Jozwiak (2025), 'EU decoupling debate: Moldova and Ukraine's path to membership under scrutiny', RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-decoupling-debate-moldova-ukraine-eu-membership/33524085.html>.

Tight Coupling and Its Consequences: The EU's New Coupling-Decoupling Dilemma

Coupling in EU enlargement has evolved significantly, fostering regional cooperation and accelerating reforms in the Baltics, creating constructive competition between Bulgaria and Romania, bridging internal EU divisions with Albania and North Macedonia, and reinforcing solidarity during wartime between Ukraine and Moldova. Yet the evolution from the Baltics’ loose, merit-based model in the late 1990s, to the procedural binding of Romania and Bulgaria in the mid-2000s, and to the tightly locked tracks of Albania–North Macedonia and Ukraine–Moldova, reveals a steady tightening of the EU’s approach. This tightening has made *coupling* more rigid and, in turn, sharpened the meaning and political weight of *decoupling* as well.

When countries are coupled, the rigidity magnifies the risks of blockage by allowing *bilateral disputes* or *candidate setbacks* to distort accession dynamics, amplifying the power of national vetoes at all accession stages that require unanimous approval, and creating *entrenched dependencies* (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Coupling zones, unanimous approval, and risk of blockages in the EU accession process



A bilateral dispute or setback in one candidate state, though significant in its own right, can now stall the entire process for its partner, regardless of individual merit and alignment with the *acquis communautaire*. Albania's progress, for instance, was held back for years due to Bulgaria's veto against North Macedonia, generating frustration in Tirana, undermining public trust, and fuelling Eurosceptic and nationalist narratives. In Estonia, while it initially created regional tensions, they were not blocked for several years and even generated a pull effect that pushed Latvia and Lithuania to accelerate their own reforms. Hence, the prolonged coupling of Albania and North Macedonia intensified the political and strategic weight of decoupling.

The Ukraine–Moldova case, however, represents a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of coupling. For the first time, coupling is directly entangled with hard security, turning EU enlargement policy itself into a frontline instrument of European defense and making the linkage between Ukraine and Moldova even more rigid, as far more is now at stake. On the one hand, Moldova being permanently stalled by blockages directed at Ukraine creates several political risks. Moldova is entering a sensitive period with parliamentary elections in September 2025, as Russian interference and pro-Russian forces are already mobilising to capitalise frustration and portray the EU as disengaged,

The Ukraine–Moldova case, however, represents a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of coupling. For the first time, coupling is directly entangled with hard security, turning EU enlargement policy itself into a frontline instrument of European defense and making the linkage between Ukraine and Moldova even more rigid, as far more is now at stake.

a narrative Chișinău is urging Brussels to counter by showing visible progress.²⁷ Consequently, this tightly coupled track risks eroding the very principles it was intended to uphold: it can dampen reform incentives, weaken public trust in the EU, and create frustration between the two candidate countries, signaling fragmentation and indecision both internally and to external observers. More importantly, every delay expands the window for Russian interference and risks repeating missed opportunities for stabilizing the region, as seen in the case with Georgia, an outcome the EU cannot afford to repeat.

²⁷ L. Bayer (2025), 'Moldova urges EU to advance membership talks to counter Moscow', Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/moldova-urges-eu-advance-membership-talks-counter-moscow-2025-07-03/>

On the other hand, while decoupling might restore the liberal merit-based logic, the security imperative of solidarity with Ukraine gives this track such political weight that decoupling has become extremely difficult.²⁸ Member States fear it could reward Hungary for its veto and only embolden further obstruction. Budapest has already leveraged unanimity to block EU military assistance through the European Peace Facility and to dilute sanctions on Russia. Beyond this, Ukraine's accession is viewed by most Member States as its only credible security guarantee given stalled NATO prospects, making unity around its candidacy strategically indispensable. France, Germany, and the Baltic states have therefore opposed any move to separate Moldova, warning that decoupling now would signal fragmentation, weaken Ukraine's case, and undermine the credibility of enlargement as a geopolitical tool. Moldova itself has also signaled caution, choosing to remain linked to Ukraine both out of solidarity and recognition that its EU bid gained traction only because of Ukraine's application.²⁹

Hence, the EU has now found itself in a narrowly framed, all-or-nothing debate: to decouple or not. What was once a flexible tool to encourage cooperation has now become a zero-sum move with significant strategic consequences, magnifying both the risks of either leaving Ukraine behind or letting Moldova fall under Russian influence. The core issue, therefore, is not whether to decouple or not, but how to reframe coupling itself and strike a balance between the political imperative of solidarity – particularly with Ukraine – and how to bring back the liberal enlargement principle of progress based on individual merit. Without such a recalibration, the EU risks locking enlargement into a rigid dilemma that undermines both the EU's credibility and its reform momentum.

The limits of current policy responses

In the light of this narrowing of the debate into binary terms of coupling versus decoupling, several policy options have been explored within the EU to address the structural problems created by tight coupling. Yet while each offers partial relief, none fundamentally resolves the underlying dilemma between solidarity and merit-based progression.

²⁸ R. Jozwiak (2025).

²⁹ R. Jozwiak (2025).

Reforming the unanimity rule

An ambitious and increasingly discussed reform to address the structural challenges of EU enlargement and coupling is the replacement of unanimity with qualified majority voting (QMV) at key stages of the accession process. As most stages currently require unanimous approval from all EU Member States, making it easy for a single actor to block the process, QMV could help restore the liberal principle of merit-based progression by shifting decisions to a broader collective threshold, thereby preventing individual Member States from derailing enlargement. Advocates of QMV, including the Renew Europe and ALDE parties, the Franco-German reform group, and certain EU Member States such as Germany, France, and Belgium, argue that this shift would make enlargement decisions more rule-based, efficient, and predictable.³⁰

The move towards QMV should still be actively advocated for, as it remains one of the most promising solutions to unblock enlargement. However, it requires treaty change to alter the voting rules for enlargement, a step that is both legally complex and politically sensitive. Many Member States, particularly smaller or more Eurosceptic ones, are reluctant to give up veto power, viewing it as a vital tool for safeguarding national interests and ensuring influence within the EU's consensus-driven framework. Even applying QMV to limited stages of enlargement could provoke significant pushback, with critics warning that it would weaken Member States' sovereignty and marginalise smaller countries in strategic decisions.³¹

Employing post-accession CVM

Drawing from Romania's example, the CVM can be employed as a compromise tool to maintain momentum and reassure hesitant EU Member States by extending oversight beyond formal accession. In principle, it could provide a mechanism to sustain reform incentives and enforce compliance after accession. However, in the cases of Ukraine and North Macedonia, post-accession monitoring is of limited utility. Vetoes of these countries are primarily politically motivated, tied to bilateral disputes over minority rights, domestic political considerations, and broader leverage within the EU, rather than the candidate's readiness.

³⁰ Z. Csaky & C. Grant (2025), 'Does EU enlargement require voting reform?', Centre for European Reform, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/does-eu-enlargement-require-voting-reform>; D. Bechev (2024), 'Can eu enlargement work?' Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/can-eu-enlargement-work?lang=en>.

³¹ Z. Csaky & C. Grant (2025).

Since monitoring only applies after formal accession, it cannot overcome pre-accession vetoes that block the opening of negotiation chapters. While it could help enforce reforms if Ukraine or North Macedonia were admitted, it does not resolve the structural problem of tight coupling and veto power that currently prevents progress. In other words, post-accession mechanisms shift the enforcement window to follow membership, but they do not address the immediate political leverage that keeps coupled tracks frozen.

Gradual integration

Another tool that can be used is gradual integration, which offers candidate countries that are committed to reforms some of the benefits of membership well ahead of accession. This can include access to EU programmes, partial participation in the single market, regulatory alignment in specific sectors, financial instruments such as pre-accession assistance, or other forms of economic and institutional cooperation.³² The goal is to reward reform progress, sustain momentum, and provide tangible incentives, even when formal accession is blocked by political disputes or vetoes.

In the context of tightly coupled accession tracks, gradual integration can help by creating flexibility. Rather than forcing a strict binary choice – either remain fully coupled or decouple entirely – the EU can allow countries to advance on reforms and receive tangible benefits independently of the political or procedural disputes affecting their partner states. Moldova, for example, has deepened its integration with the Union regardless of delays affecting Ukraine, such as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area and forthcoming EU-wide roaming rules in 2026.³³

That said, while gradual integration is a strong and necessary policy that should be preserved and further strengthened to implement irreversible reforms, it cannot directly resolve the structural problem of veto-driven blockages or the wider coupling-decoupling dilemma. Moldova, for example, remains procedurally tied to Ukraine and cannot open its first negotiation cluster until Kyiv's path advances. Hence, in order to enhance the effectiveness of gradual integration, it must be complemented by policies that directly address tight coupling, ensuring that procedural interdependencies do not undermine the momentum it generates.

³² P. Buras (2025), 'Gradual Integration: Bringing Aspiring Members Closer to the EU', Think Tank Europa, <https://thinkeuropa.dk/files/media/document/report-gradual-integration-bringing-aspiring-members-closer-to-the-eu.pdf>.

³³ P. Buras (2025).

Informal mentorship and bilateral initiatives

Finally, in recent years, a growing number of bilateral mentorship initiatives such as Twinning and Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) have provided valuable short-term technical support to help candidate countries adopt and implement EU legislation.³⁴ Examples include the Baltic states, in particular Lithuania's collaboration with Sweden on labour market reform and administrative capacity via the EU's Twinning instrument. Similarly, Bulgaria and Romania benefited from coordinated mentorship under the PHARE pre-accession assistance and the INTERREG cross-border cooperation programme.³⁵

However, despite their practical benefits, such arrangements remain fragmented, short-term, and only loosely connected to formal EU decision-making processes. Their scope, intensity, and political significance vary widely depending on bilateral relationships and the domestic priorities of the supporting Member State. Most importantly, these informal mechanisms cannot shield a candidate country from the impact of political impasses or bilateral disputes affecting its partner. In this sense, mentorship and ad hoc support can ease the symptoms of enlargement dysfunction, but they do not address the underlying structural problem: procedural dependency created by the EU's unanimity requirement and the politically driven coupling of accession tracks.

Ultimately, most of these tools fall short of addressing the core issue: tightly coupled accession tracks force the EU into a binary choice between remaining fully coupled and decoupling entirely. While these measures can provide temporary relief, sustain reform momentum, or offer partial benefits, they do not fully account for the long-term implications of coupling or the structural dependencies created by political vetoes. QMV could, in theory, address this by reducing the leverage of individual Member States, but it remains politically and legally. What is needed instead is a fundamental recalibration of coupling itself – an approach that balances solidarity with merit, mitigates veto-induced dependencies, and ensures that candidates can advance based on their own performance rather than the political disputes of others.

³⁴ European Commission (n.d.), 'Twinning', Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/funding-technical-assistance/twinning_en.

³⁵ G. Noutcheva & D. Bechev (2008).

Policy recommendations

To reconcile the political imperative of solidarity with the foundational principle of merit-based progress in coupling, this paper recommends a three-part strategy to mitigate the risks of tight coupling: (1) introduce a formal time limit on political coupling at key accession stages, (2) transition to looser procedural coupling to enable differentiated progress, and (3) institutionalise a strategic mentorship mechanism to stabilise reform trajectories during periods of divergence or delay.

1. Time Limit on Political Coupling at Key Accession Stages

Candidates may start accession on a coupled track to foster cooperation and signal unity. However, to prevent it from hardening into a rigid procedural dependence, the EU should introduce a formal limit on how long a country can remain procedurally blocked by its partner at key accession stages and make it possible to shift to a looser coupling model or, if necessary, decouple. This can be done through two mechanisms:

1. A pre-defined time limit at key accession stages, ideally set at 6 to 12 months from the moment a country meets opening conditions but is prevented from moving forward due to coupling.

Once this pre-defined time limit elapses, two complementary mechanisms could be applied, depending on the circumstances:

2. Candidate-initiated request: The candidate country that has met technical criteria can formally petition to request a looser coupling model and advance independently on certain clusters or benchmarks. The partner state retains a right of reply, ensuring a transparent, consultative process that balances solidarity with individual progress.
3. Council review: Alternatively, or in tandem, the Council can evaluate whether continued coupling remains justified. This allows the EU to step in if delays threaten reform momentum, credibility, or strategic priorities, and to decide whether a shift to looser procedural coupling or, if necessary, decoupling is warranted.

By combining a clear time limit with these follow-up options, the EU can ensure solidarity while also restoring the liberal, merit-based nature of enlargement. The time limit also ensures coupling does not harden into rigid dependency, allowing quicker reassessment and structured pathways to looser arrangements, so that if decoupling is eventually chosen, it can

happen smoothly without the heightened stakes of previous decouplings. This framework empowers candidate countries with a formal voice in the process, institutionalises debate rather than leaving it to political deadlock, and shields enlargement from unnecessary gridlock.

2. Reframing and Transitioning to Looser Procedural Coupling

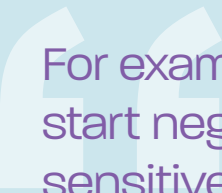
The question that follows is how to reframe coupling and have a framework for looser, more flexible forms of coupling that allow progress while maintaining political cohesion. Looser coupling, coupling itself has to be reframed. A way to reframe it is to make it context-sensitive rather than uniform. With time and new geopolitical challenges, not all couplings need to function the same way: some are primarily political and procedural, while others are deeply tied to questions of security and solidarity. To reflect this, the EU could apply two models of looser coupling, depending on the nature of the linkage.

Asymmetric advancement for political/procedural couplings

Under this model, countries that are symbolically grouped can still advance independently once they meet technical criteria, even if their partner remains blocked. This allows progress without formally dissolving the political grouping. For example, one country could begin negotiations on Cluster 1 while the other receives additional support and mentorship to mitigate scepticism (see the Recommendation 3 on Strategic Mentorship, p. 12). The Albania–North Macedonia case illustrates how this approach might have prevented unnecessary deadlock: Albania could have advanced without waiting for Bulgaria’s veto against North Macedonia to be resolved.

Cluster-based looser coupling for strategic/security couplings

While asymmetric advancement addresses blockages in primarily political or procedural couplings, a different approach is needed in contexts where security and strategic considerations dominate. In today’s environment, with security at the forefront of the enlargement debate, coupling could remain intact for core areas where solidarity is essential – such as the foreign policy alignment, defense cooperation, energy security – while being relaxed for less politically contentious areas such as digital, education, or environmental standards where gradual integration has been used. This ensures that candidate countries remain closely aligned where unity is most vital but can still demonstrate reform progress and maintain momentum in technical areas. For example, Moldova could start negotiations on less sensitive clusters where it has already advanced



For example, Moldova could start negotiations on less sensitive clusters where it has already advanced through gradual integration, while maintaining close coordination with Ukraine on the most urgent and sensitive issues, sending a clear and unified strategic signal in these critical areas.

through gradual integration, while maintaining close coordination with Ukraine on the most urgent and sensitive issues, sending a clear and unified strategic signal in these critical areas.

Which model to apply should be determined based on the nature of the blockage, the strategic importance of the country or policy area, and the overall political climate. In either case, this flexible, modular approach enables the EU to preserve its strategic messaging while maintaining credibility, rewarding individual merit, and avoiding unnecessary enlargement deadlock.

3. Strategic mentorship: Filling the gaps and stabilising the process

To complement looser coupling, the EU should establish mechanisms that maintain cooperation between coupled countries while projecting a unified message to external actors. This can be formalised through mentorship mechanisms that support candidate countries facing delays, perceptions of unequal treatment, or a lack of engagement during procedural blockages. Mentorship can take two forms: it can be provided by EU Member States or by pairing candidate countries to mentor each other. Member State mentorship helps build closer political ties and addresses internal EU scepticism on enlargement, strengthening support for new members, while candidate-to-candidate mentorship fosters regional cooperation and reinforces the coupling narrative.

There are three possible models for integrating mentorship within the enlargement framework.

Universal embedded mentorship

All candidates are assigned mentors from the start, which may be EU Member States and/or paired candidate countries mentoring each other. This model fosters fairness, familiarises candidates with EU decision-making processes, reinforces reform discipline from the beginning, and encourages cohesion across the enlargement process. However, it requires significant EU resources and sustained commitment.

Targeted strategic mentorship

In this case, mentorship is deployed reactively when a country falls behind or faces political blockage. This model is efficient, resource-conscious, and provides focused support to help candidates overcome specific obstacles, navigate bilateral tensions, or address internal EU scepticism. At the same time, it risks perceptions of favouritism or creating 'second tier' candidates.

Hybrid responsive mentorship (recommended)

This approach is recommended as it combines the strengths of both models. All candidates receive baseline mentorship, but when one country in a coupled pair becomes blocked, its mentorship intensifies to address the blockage and its underlying issues. Simultaneously, the partner country receives tailored support to continue advancing through looser coupling or cluster-based progression. Member States and/or partner candidates can serve as mentors, reinforcing solidarity and reducing isolation without compromising merit-based progress.

In geopolitically sensitive contexts such as Ukraine and Moldova, embedded mentorship in Ukraine would be proactive and strategically coordinated by the EU-26 coalition of Member States to mitigate Hungary's veto while sustaining reform momentum. The EU-26 would provide guidance on political strategy, advising Ukrainian negotiators on building coalitions with supportive Member States, preparing evidence-based responses to Hungary's concerns, and designing negotiation tactics to reduce the likelihood of



In geopolitically sensitive contexts such as Ukraine and Moldova, embedded mentorship in Ukraine would be proactive and strategically coordinated by the EU-26

procedural blockages. Mentorship would also offer targeted support on policy areas cited by Hungary, such as minority rights, energy alignment, and trade regulations, to remove potential grounds for obstruction. Additional guidance on navigating EU institutions and anticipating critical decision points would further empower Ukrainian negotiators, while communication mentorship would help maintain domestic support and international visibility during periods of procedural delay. Crucially, the backing of the EU-26 would help sustain Ukraine's political momentum and position Hungary's veto as an isolated challenge rather than a blockade of the collective EU will.

For Moldova, while it starts negotiations on less sensitive clusters, a separate Security and Strategic Alignment Taskforce would be established to coordinate on high-stakes areas where solidarity and security are essential with Ukraine, including foreign policy, energy security, defense cooperation, and other strategic priorities. This working group would bring together mentors from Moldova, Ukraine, and EU Member States to advise both on joint positions, negotiation strategies, and policy alignment, ensuring that independent advancement in technical chapters does not weaken the unified strategic message.

Conclusion

Coupling in EU enlargement stands at a decisive crossroads. At its best, coupling has promoted regional cooperation, coordination of reforms, and symbolic unity, and it has helped sustain momentum. This is the case, for example, in the Baltics, where coupling helped them gain influence and streamline their accession. Yet what began as a flexible tool to foster cooperation has hardened into tight political coupling, as seen in Albania–North Macedonia and Ukraine–Moldova with an added security dimension, that now stalls reformers, empowers veto players, and forces an artificial binary: stay coupled or decouple. This dilemma not only undermines the liberal, merit-based principle of enlargement but has also made it difficult for the EU to develop alternative ways of projecting a unified message and maintaining strategic coordination.

This paper therefore argues that the time has come for the EU to rethink and recalibrate the use of coupling, not to abandon it altogether, as it remains an underexamined aspect of enlargement policy. Going forward, the EU needs to clearly define what coupling means in practice, establish time limits on coupling, enable looser models for differentiated advancement, and institutionalise strategic mentorship to prevent political impasses from freezing the entire

enlargement agenda. Mechanisms such as the Security and Strategic Alignment Taskforce for Ukraine and Moldova, provides an alternative means of maintaining a unified EU message, ensuring that technical progress in independent clusters does not weaken strategic solidarity in areas such as foreign policy, defense, and energy security. It also requires recognising that there needs to be different kinds of coupling depending on context with the changing geopolitical environment, and that both EU Member States and candidate countries have a role to play in supporting each other's progress. Failing to adapt risks both credibility and stability; recalibrating now allows the EU to deliver on its promise of unity while ensuring enlargement strengthens, rather than undermines, the Union.

Time is of the essence in EU enlargement as it is no longer a technical policy but a frontline instrument of European security. With geopolitical urgency mounting and deepening security risks, the Union cannot afford to manage the costs of coupling and lose another country; it is time to design alternatives that unlock progress. The credibility of the EU as a liberal, values-based union depends on it, and it is time to bring this debate to the forefront of enlargement policy.

References

ALDE Party (2024). 'Your Europe, Your Freedom: Delivering Change for You – ALDE Party 2024 Manifesto'. <https://www.aldeparty.eu/vision-manifestos>.

Alesina, M. (2022). 'Staged Integration for Future EU Enlargement'. European Liberal Forum, <https://liberalforum.eu/updates/publication/policy-paper-20-staged-integration-for-future-eu-enlargement/>.

Aurescu, B. (2005). 'The Impact of the Enlarged European Union on New Member States and Prospects for Further Enlargement'. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania Substitute Member of the Venice Commission*, [https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-UDT\(2005\)032-e](https://www.coe.int/en/web/venice-commission/-/CDL-UDT(2005)032-e).

Bayer, L. (2025). 'Moldova urges EU to advance membership talks to counter Moscow'. *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/moldova-urges-eu-advance-membership-talks-counter-moscow-2025-07-03/>.

Bechev, D. (2024). 'Can eu enlargement work?'. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/can-eu-enlargement-work?lang=en>.

Buras, P. (2025). 'Gradual Integration: Bringing Aspiring Members Closer to the EU'. *Think Tank Europa*, <https://thinkeuropa.dk/files/media/document/report-gradual-integration-bringing-aspiring-members-closer-to-the-eu.pdf>.

Csaky, Z., & Grant, C. (2025). 'Does EU enlargement require voting reform?'. *Centre for European Reform*, <https://www.cer.eu/insights/does-eu-enlargement-require-voting-reform>;

Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (2024). 'Commission Adopts 2024 Enlargement Package'. European Commission, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2024-enlargement-package-2024-10-30_en.

Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009). 'Estonia's Way into the European Union'. https://eu.mfa.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/09/Estonias_way_into_the_EU.pdf.

European Commission (1997). 'Commission Opinion on Estonia's Application for Membership of the European Union'. European Union, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/aed248df-1104-415e-b279-a372b63d0f80>.

European Council (2025). 'How EU Enlargement Works'. European Council – Council of the European Union, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/how-enlargement-works/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#Enlargement.

European Parliament (2019). 'Opening Accession Negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania'. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0050_EN.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

European Union (2007). 'The 2004 Enlargement: The Challenge of a 25-member EU'. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/the-2004-enlargement-the-challenge-of-a-25-member-eu.html..>

Gabidzashvili, I. (2021). 'European Policy Review: The EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans: Accession Negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania'. European Student Think Tank, <https://esthinktank.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/EPR-vol2.2-2019-Interactive.pdf>.

Jozwiak, R. (2025). 'EU Decoupling Debate: Moldova and Ukraine's Path to Membership Under Scrutiny'. *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-decoupling-debate-moldova-ukraine-eu-membership/33524085.html>.

Litra (2024). 'Dreaming of EU: The Challenges Ahead for Ukraine's and Moldova's Accession'. *European Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://ecfr.eu/article/dreaming-of-eu-the-challenges-ahead-for-ukraines-and-moldovas-accession/>.

Nikolova, P. (2006). 'Negotiating for EU Membership? The Case of Bulgaria and Romania'. *Croatian Yearbook of European Law & Policy*, 2(1), 393–412.

Noutcheva, G., & Bechev, D. (2008). 'The Successful Laggards: Bulgaria and Romania's Accession to the EU'. *East European Politics and Societies*, 22(1), 114–144.

Novinite (2006). 'Timeline: Bulgaria and the EU'. *Novinite.com - Sofia News Agency*, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/70184/Timeline%3A+Bulgaria+and+the+EU>.

Ozolina, Z. (1999). 'The Impact of the European Union on Baltic Co-operation'. Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/ozz01/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#note4.

Taylor-Brace, A., & G. Gotev, G. (2024). 'Albania's EU Path Decoupled from North Macedonia while Skopje Remains in Limbo'. *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albanias-eu-path-decoupled-from-north-macedonia-while-skopje-remains-in-limbo/>.

Westin, A. (1998). 'The Baltic Countries and Accession to the European Union'. In International Monetary Fund, *The Baltic Countries*, chapter 7, <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/downloadpdf/display/book/9781557757388/ch07.pdf>.






Author bio

Sofia Mørch is a Governance Fellow at ELF specializing on EU Enlargement. Previously, she was a Program Associate at NDI, managing democratic development programs in Africa and Eastern Europe. She also contributed to post-war policy recommendations on Ukraine at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 56 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

A liberal future in a united Europe

 /europeanliberalforum
 /europeanliberalforum
 @eurliberalforum
 eurliberalforum
 @eurliberalforum.bsky.social

liberalforum.eu

DOI: 10.53121/ELFPP33

ISSN 2736-5816



Graphic Design: Altais
Cover image: Pexels

Copyright 2025 / European Liberal Forum European EUPF.

This publication was co-financed by the European Parliament. The European Parliament is not responsible for the content of this publication, or for any use that may be made of it.