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EU DIFFERENTIATED INTEGRATION AND FUTURE ENLARGEMENTS

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Abstract. ***Differentiated integration has become the "new normal" of the European Union, embedded in its treaties and institutional practices and revitalized by successive geopolitical and economic shocks — from Russia's aggression against Ukraine to the financial, migration, and health crises. This study examines differentiated integration as both a governance instrument and a pre-accession mechanism, identifying the conditions under which it accelerates integration and supports enlargement without undermining legal unity, democratic legitimacy, or institutional sustainability. Using a mixed explanatory–comparative design, the research combines systematic document analysis with qualitative case comparison across three clusters of candidates (Ukraine–Moldova, the Western Balkans, and Georgia). Differentiation is operationalized along two axes — vertical (centralization level) and horizontal (territorial scope) — and assessed through indicators of interdependence, politicization, and legitimacy. The findings demonstrate that differentiated integration enhances the EU's adaptability, enabling progress among willing and capable members while preserving inclusiveness. It functions as a transitional technology for "conditional acceleration," aligning internal EU reforms with gradual, merit-based enlargement. Between 2025 and 2029, differentiated integration can serve as both a strategic and pragmatic framework to advance cohesion, strengthen governance capacity, and reaffirm the EU's credibility as a transformative actor in its neighborhood.***

Keywords: *differentiated integration; European Union; enlargement; governance; conditional acceleration*

Introduction. Differentiated integration has become the *"new normal"* of the European Union: it is embedded in the Treaties, supported by institutional practices, and reactivated by recent geopolitical and economic shocks—such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the financial and migration crises, and the pandemic—while the enlargement policy once again occupies a central place on the EU's strategic agenda. The relevance of this topic is twofold. On the one hand, differentiation calibrates the European Union's capacity for action within a heterogeneous internal environment; on the other, it shapes the credibility of the enlargement process—particularly for Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkan states—as well as the cohesion of the Single Market, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and various sectoral policies. The purpose of this study is to provide an analytical framework for understanding differentiated integration as both a governance and pre-accession instrument, identifying the conditions under which it accelerates integration and prepares enlargement without undermining legal unity, democratic legitimacy, or institutional sustainability.

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Materials and Methods. The research is grounded in a mixed explanatory–comparative approach, combining documentary analysis with comparative case studies. The study covers the historical evolution of differentiated integration from 1957 to 2024 and formulates prospective scenarios for the period 2025–2029, in the context of the European Union's renewed enlargement agenda. Primary sources include the EU's founding and reform treaties—the Treaty on European Union (1992) and the Treaty of Lisbon (2007)—as well as secondary legislation, the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, official documents of the European Commission and the European Council, and relevant academic literature. Differentiation is operationalized along two analytical axes: the vertical dimension (degree of centralization) and the horizontal dimension (territorial scope). The analysis relies on indicators of interdependence and politicization. The evaluation framework comprises three key dimensions: effectiveness, sustainability, and democratic legitimacy. The applied methods include normative analysis, induction, deduction, and qualitative comparison across candidate clusters (Ukraine–Republic of Moldova, the Western Balkan states, and Georgia). The validity of the results is ensured through the analysis and triangulation of the selected indicators.

Results and Discussion. Differentiated integration is formally codified in the treaties and legislation of the European Union. Since the establishment of the European Economic Community in 1957, transitional arrangements have been introduced, granting Member States temporary derogations from the application of EU law. Such transitional differentiation has been particularly frequent during the accession stages of new members.

Beginning in the 1990s, the European Union also witnessed the emergence of differentiation of an indefinite nature among existing Member States. Paradigmatic examples include the Eurozone and the Schengen Area, which have exempted states unwilling to participate or continue to exclude those that do not meet the prerequisites or convergence criteria stipulated by the Treaty on European Union (1992). In recent decades, the momentum for differentiated integration has been reinforced by both political developments and the EU's financial support mechanisms. The debate on the Future of Europe explicitly incorporated internal differentiation as a strategic and pragmatic policy option for accommodating diversity while preserving the Union's functional and institutional coherence.

Conceptual Foundations and Typologies of Differentiation. The core concept of this analysis is differentiation, understood as any form of integration or cooperation that enables states (both EU members and non-members) as well as sub-state entities to collaborate in heterogeneous and flexible ways (Pirozzi, 2022). This comprehensive definition allows for a multidimensional analytical approach capable of capturing the diverse forms that differentiation assumes within the European Union.

Accordingly, differentiation occurs when some EU Member States—sometimes in cooperation with non-member states—choose to deepen integration within the *acquis communautaire*, to cooperate beyond the existing acquis, or to partially opt out of it. Such processes generate institutional and legal arrangements whose composition diverges from the formal status of EU membership.

The European Commission (1997) defines differentiated integration as an integration process in which Member States, possibly together with non-member states, advance

at different speeds and/or toward different objectives, contrasting with the notion of a monolithic bloc of states pursuing identical goals at the same pace. Prominent examples of differentiated integration include the Economic and Monetary Union, the Schengen System, and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the field of defence.

In our conceptualization, however, differentiated integration represents one possible outcome of the broader phenomenon of differentiation (as defined above). Other potential outcomes include differentiated cooperation—as observed in the realm of foreign and security policy, where coordination of national policies among smaller groups of Member States (sometimes involving non-member partners) occurs on the margins or outside the institutional and legal framework of the European Union (Siddi et al., 2022).

Differentiated integration has evolved into a defining feature of the European Union, serving as a mechanism to reconcile the diverse preferences of Member States regarding the depth and scope of European integration. Initially, differentiated integration was expected to represent only a temporary deviation from uniform integration, with the assumption that other states would eventually join the core initiatives. A recent illustration of this dynamic is Denmark's decision to join the European Security and Defence Policy in June 2022, following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Despite certain cases of subsequent alignment, differentiated integration has proven to be a persistent and structural element of the EU's institutional architecture.

From its inception, differentiation—in the form of exemptions and derogations granted to specific Member States—has been an integral part of the European integration project, even if initially applied in a limited and transitional manner (Hanf, 2001). According to the Monnet Method, European integration was envisioned to advance functionally toward an "ever closer union" (Monnet, 1978). Yet, it soon became evident that European integration does not evolve toward a uniform outcome, but rather toward a plurality of differentiated arrangements that vary across policy sectors, encompass distinct groups of Member States, and employ diverse decision-making procedures.

The rise of differentiation as one of the most enduring—and arguably defining—features of European integration can be traced to two major transformations experienced by the European Communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. First, the shift from an economic community to a (differentiated) political union, encompassing the "core powers of the state" (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2014); and second, the adoption of a new and ambitious enlargement agenda that followed the end of the Cold War.

A seminal mechanism of differentiated integration was the Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985 by five Member States (France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg), which established the free movement of persons and the abolition of internal border controls. The agreement was initially concluded outside the EU's institutional framework but was later incorporated into EU law through the Treaty of Amsterdam. Differentiated integration gained an even broader dimension with the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam. The Maastricht Treaty introduced a mechanism of differentiation—initially conceived as temporary but with the potential to become permanent—between the states that accepted the introduction of a single currency and those that opted for a derogation (initially the United Kingdom and Denmark).

The period between the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam was the most prolific in terms of developing institutional solutions aimed at managing the growing differentiation within the European Union. In 1994, several conceptual models emerged, including the British-inspired notions of a "Europe à la carte" and "variable geometry", alongside the "hard core" theory derived from a policy paper drafted by German CDU members Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers.

The latter model envisaged a relatively stable group of Member States—though open to new participants—willing to advance integration at a deeper level and enjoying a certain degree of autonomy in relation to the rest of the Union. By contrast, the British model, without seeking to establish a distinct subsystem within the EU, appeared motivated primarily by the desire to enhance decision-making efficiency, preventing situations in which the veto power of one or several Member States would obstruct those ready to move forward with joint initiatives. In December 1995, the Chirac–Kohl joint letter proposed the inclusion in the EU treaties of a general clause on "enhanced cooperation", which was later incorporated into the Treaty of Amsterdam.

Another variant of "variable geometry Europe" was the concept of "concentric circles", introduced by French Prime Minister Édouard Balladur in 1994. His proposal envisioned differentiation not only among existing Member States but also among future ones. The outermost circle would encompass countries with a vocation for EU membership or those associated through cooperation agreements; the intermediate circles would group Member States implementing common policies; and the innermost circles would include those participating in forms of enhanced cooperation, in principle open to all EU states.

This "concentric circles" formula was later revived by Jacques Delors, who nonetheless distinguished between a "large Europe"—comprising all Member States—and a "small Europe", more deeply integrated and conceived as a "federation of nation-states." Delors later refined his vision by proposing the establishment of an "avant-garde" group of states committed to advancing political integration through the conclusion of a new treaty specifically dedicated to this goal.

The "avant-garde" concept was later revived in the "Penelope" draft treaty, presented in 2002 by a working group of European officials chaired by François Lamoureux, during the presidency of Romano Prodi. From a political analysis perspective, the avant-garde or core Europe theory appears more desirable than the variable geometry model, as it envisions the creation of a pioneering group with a permanent vocation, thereby preventing excessive fragmentation within the European Union.

The European Union thus represents a system of differentiated integration, in which differentiation constitutes both an essential and likely enduring feature of European construction. Within the EU framework, a distinction is drawn between vertical and horizontal differentiation. Vertical differentiation refers to the fact that various policy areas have been integrated at different speeds and have reached varying levels of centralization over time. Horizontal differentiation, by contrast, relates to the territorial dimension—many integrated policies do not apply uniformly or exclusively across all Member States. While vertical differentiation has been a constant feature, horizontal differentiation expanded significantly after the 1990s, particularly during the implementation of the Treaty on European Union (1992).

Scholars Frank Schimmelfennig, Dirk Leuffen, and Berthold Rittberger identify two primary drivers of European integration: *interdependence* and *politicization* (Schimmelfennig, 2015). Interdependence generates the demand for integration, whereas politicization modulates and may fragment it horizontally. Differentiation has accompanied and facilitated both the deepening and the widening of the European Union, intensifying as the Union's competences, policy domains, and membership expanded. Internal differentiation arises when supranational integration progresses under conditions of high interdependence and asymmetric politicization among Member States; external differentiation occurs when non-member states selectively align with EU policies characterized by high interdependence and low politicization.

Differentiated integration has been a recurring theme in the political debate on European integration since its inception. As Marco Brunazzo (2022) notes in this special issue, the notion of differentiated integration has been consistently present in the ideas and conceptual frameworks employed by political leaders to address the major crises and dilemmas confronting the European integration process.

Terms such as "core Europe" (Wolfgang Schäuble and Karl Lamers), "avant-garde" (Jacques Chirac), "centre of gravity" (Joschka Fischer), and "directorate" (Charles de Gaulle) reflect various forms and interpretations of differentiation within the European integration process. However, the academic investigation of differentiated integration emerged relatively late, primarily as part of broader efforts to conceptualize, understand, and explain the profound transformations that followed the relaunch of the European integration project in the mid-1980s.

Over time, scholars have proposed multiple definitions and analytical approaches to differentiated integration as part of a wider attempt to theorize the processes of deepening and widening integration, and to study the European Union as a distinct—differentiated—system of policymaking, particularly evident after the Treaty of Maastricht.

The first phase of research on differentiated integration began amid renewed debates among political scientists over institutional changes within the European Economic Community (EEC) and later the European Union. The Single European Act (1986/1987) and the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) introduced the first two major sets of amendments to the Treaties of Rome, while a third set was negotiated during the Intergovernmental Conference of 1996–1997. Within this evolving institutional context, new reflections on flexible integration emerged as a response to three central challenges.

First, the Maastricht Treaty granted certain Member States derogations from EU primary law in the form of subjective opt-outs (stemming from a political decision not to participate) and objective opt-outs (resulting from a state's inability to meet the criteria for participation) (Brunazzo, 2022). These non-participation mechanisms challenged traditional assumptions about EU membership, blurring the boundaries between integration and non-integration (Howarth, 1994).

Second, scholars began to observe a loss of institutional homogeneity, as the new EU architecture fragmented the unity of the decision-making mechanism by juxtaposing the supranational method of the first pillar with the intergovernmental cooperation of the second and third pillars—covering the newly introduced domains of Justice and Home Affairs, and the Common Foreign and Security Policy, respectively (Wallace & Wallace, 1995).

Third, the EU's new and ambitious enlargement agenda exposed the Union to an even higher degree of heterogeneity, both internally, in terms of membership composition, and externally, as new states entered its neighbourhood. Collectively, these developments called for a greater degree of flexibility within the European Union (Centre for Economic Policy Research, 1995).

According to Thomas Mehlhausen's approach, European integration becomes differentiated the moment at least one Member State does not fully participate in a common policy area. The more policy domains are established, the more the EU becomes vertically differentiated; conversely, when Member States refrain from further deepening integration, horizontal differentiation occurs (Mehlhausen, 2025). From an empirical standpoint, Frank Schimmelfennig and Thomas Winzen have identified approximately 230 instances of differentiation throughout the history of the European Union (Schimmelfennig, 2020), while conceptually Alexander Stubb proposed more than 30 alternative labels to describe the various forms of asynchronous integration (Stubb, 1996).

Stubb anchored the concept of differentiated integration in three variables — time, space, and matter — corresponding to temporal, territorial, and sectoral differentiation, which rarely overlap perfectly in practice. He distinguished among several analytical models:

- ✓ the "multi-speed Europe", where a core group of Member States pursues common objectives to be achieved later by others;
- ✓ the "core Europe", where the EU becomes irreversibly divided between a central core and a periphery;
- ✓ the "Europe à la carte", in which Member States voluntarily choose among policies, committing only to a minimal set of shared objectives.

The multi-speed Europe model assumes that all Member States commit to achieving common integration goals, albeit at different speeds. Asynchronous integration is thus conceived as a temporary stage, since each state is expected to eventually close the gap. Due to its inherent flexibility, this model allows for gradual constitutional transformation, facilitating the reduction of disparities and stimulating further integration. Decisions in this model continue to be adopted through the Community method, grounded in the EU treaties. A relevant example is the pre-accession process to the Economic and Monetary Union, where all Member States that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 pledged to introduce the euro once the convergence criteria are met.

The "Europe à la carte" model, by contrast, enables any Member State to decide freely whether to cooperate more closely with others in selected policy areas. Its main vulnerability lies in the heterogeneity of preferences among Member States, which may lead to the emergence of "islands" of integration and dynamically fuel disintegrative tendencies. Since many European policies are mutually interdependent (e.g., the internal market, competition, technical standards, and regulatory oversight), selective participation risks disrupting these linkages, weakening network effects and economies of scale. This, in turn, undermines the functional spillovers that sustain integration. The proliferation of parallel regimes — with differing formats, rules, and timelines — increases opacity, duplicates procedures, multiplies veto points, and slows coordination during crises, precisely when cohesion is most needed.

European scholars argue that the European Union constitutes a system of differentiated integration, grounded in three main dimensions: the level of centralization, the functional scope, and the territorial extension (Schimmelfennig, 2015). Unlike the "multi-speed Europe" vision, the EU is characterized by a single institutional core—anchored in the Treaty on European Union and composed of the European Council, the Council of the EU, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Court of Justice of the EU—which initiates policies while allowing variation in both the degree of centralization and the territorial scope of application across policy domains (e.g., the Eurozone, the Schengen Area, and the Single Market).

At the same time, there exists a central group of Member States—comprising the six founding members of the European Communities and the majority of Eurozone countries—that participate in all EU activities at the highest level of integration. Consequently, the EU does not represent "many Europes" with distinct, task-specific jurisdictions, each having its own organizational structure. Rather, it constitutes a single Europe, with one institutional core and one core group of Member States, whose territorial reach varies functionally. This configuration defines the EU as a system of differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig, 2015).

Differentiated Integration as a Governance Mechanism. The differences among Member State groups and among decision-making procedures became especially pronounced following the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in 1992 and the formal inclusion of differentiation mechanisms in the treaties—first through the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), which allowed opt-out clauses, and later through the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), which introduced the instrument of enhanced cooperation. Simultaneously, differentiation emerged as a key instrument for reconciling the diverse priorities and concerns of the EU and its candidate countries both before and after the "Big Bang enlargement" of 2004–2007. It also served to structure the EU's relations with third countries that either could not or did not wish to become full members.

Today, whether viewed in a positive or negative light, differentiation has become the "new normal" in the European Union—a consolidated feature of European integration (Leuffen et al., 2013). The Eurozone and the Schengen Area have solidified as long-term projects of differentiated integration among Member States. A more recent development is the launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) under Articles 42(6) and 46 of the Treaty on European Union, which enables groups of willing and capable states to cooperate more closely in the field of defence through innovative and flexible arrangements.

The diverse—and often divergent—responses of Member States to the challenges posed by the financial and economic crisis and the migration crisis have reinforced the view that uniformity is difficult to achieve in times of political, social, and economic turbulence.

The question of what effects further differentiation might have on EU citizens' attitudes requires a nuanced answer. Depending on nationality and ideological orientation, support for differentiation varies across competing models. Evidence suggests that the multi-speed Europe model generates less conflict potential than the Europe à la carte model, owing to generally higher approval rates, smaller variations in public support,

and likely only temporary national divisions stemming from the euro area crisis. Although relative majorities support both models when compared to uniform integration, any form of differentiation appears likely to deepen the cleavages between supporters and opponents of further integration. Thus, differentiation is poised to produce centrifugal rather than centripetal effects on the future of European integration and may intensify the politicization of debates about the EU's trajectory rather than diminish it (Schimmelfennig, 2015).

K. Holzinger and F. Schimmelfennig have critically reassessed the traditional threefold conceptualization of differentiated integration, arguing that it lacks analytical precision and functional depth. In response, they proposed a sixfold typology of differentiated integration that captures its structural and procedural diversity (Holzinger, 2012):

- ✓ Permanent vs. temporary differentiation;
- ✓ Territorial vs. purely functional differentiation;
- ✓ Differentiation among nation-states vs. multi-level differentiation;
- ✓ Intra-treaty vs. extra-treaty differentiation;
- ✓ Decision-making differentiation at the EU level vs. regime-level differentiation;
- ✓ Differentiation limited to Member States vs. inclusion of non-member states or areas outside EU territory.

In uniform integration, all Member States (and only Member States) participate equally in all common policies. In contrast, differentiated integration allows both Member and non-member states to engage selectively in EU policies, thereby expanding the Union's governance framework beyond its formal membership.

Scholarly literature suggests that the demand for differentiated integration stems from the international diversity of states in terms of size, wealth, and national identity. These structural differences generate heterogeneous preferences for integration, varying levels of interdependence, and unequal state capacities. Moreover, the extent of agreement on differentiation depends on the size and bargaining power of internal and external coalitions, the externalities produced by differentiation, and the institutional context in which negotiations occur. Ultimately, differentiated integration is shaped by both centrifugal and centripetal dynamics, reflecting the path dependence of institutional practice.

Assessments of differentiated integration diverge widely. Negative evaluations emphasize the risks to legal unity, European democracy, and solidarity, whereas positive assessments underline its potential to enhance democratic flexibility and facilitate integration in a heterogeneous union. More research is needed to explore the relationship between differentiated integration and other forms of EU flexibility, as well as citizens' attitudes, party positions, and the broader effects of differentiation on EU cohesion and legitimacy.

However, as the European Union entered a prolonged cycle of overlapping crises—the financial and economic crisis (2008–2012), the migration governance crisis (2015–2016), Brexit (2016–2020), and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022)—theoretical frameworks portraying European integration as a linear, completed project proved insufficient. In the aftermath of these crises, the EU became "more institutionally complex,

less territorially coherent, and less elite-driven than it used to be" (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2014). The cumulative effect of these shocks was the emergence of an even more differentiated Union—one capable of experiencing simultaneous accelerations of integration, disintegrative dynamics, and new patterns of differentiation (Fossum, 2015).

In this context, Sergio Fabbrini (2015) argued that multiple "Unions" coexist within the EU, reflecting the foundational differentiation between supranational and intergovernmental governance regimes established by the Treaty of Maastricht.

Returning to the definition of differentiation, differentiated integration may also involve actors beyond nation-states, such as transnational networks of local and regional authorities. Furthermore, traditional approaches focused solely on the regulatory dimension of differentiation fail to capture the full policy cycle, which encompasses agenda-setting, policy formulation, and implementation stages. Therefore, analytical models of differentiated integration must also incorporate the organizational dimension, recognizing the multi-level and dynamic character of governance within the European Union.

Consequently, differentiated integration is defined here as a formally organized arrangement within the European Union that:

(i) is constructed by a differentiated group of national and/or subnational EU actors, possibly in cooperation with external partners;
(ii) establishes legally binding commitments that guide the conduct of its members within a specific sector (regulatory dimension); and
(iii) creates one or more dedicated governance bodies designed to sustain and advance the integration process (organizational dimension).

Differentiated Integration and the Future of EU Enlargement (2025–2029 Horizon). The enlargement of the European Union has re-emerged as a geopolitical priority following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and amid an increasingly uncertain transatlantic environment, which endows the process with renewed strategic significance. At the same time, enlargement remains a merit-based and conditional process, firmly anchored in the Copenhagen criteria and the fundamentals—democracy, rule of law, human rights, and good governance—and contingent upon alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

This dual framework—geopolitical urgency combined with normative conditionality—suggests a phase of selective acceleration during the period 2025–2029: progress may intensify where reforms and convergence are demonstrable but remains reversible where standards are unmet. A dissonant element in this overall picture is Georgia's unilateral suspension of accession negotiations on 28 November 2024, which underscores the continuing heterogeneity of trajectories and the persistent risk of political reversibility.

Economic and security drivers of acceleration. The evidence highlights the positive legacy of previous enlargements—notably that of 2004—which fostered additional growth, socio-economic convergence, network effects within the Single Market, and mutual benefits for both "old" and "new" Member States. For 2025–2029, the economic rationale is clear: an expanded Single Market and the gradual integration of human capital, industrial capacity, digital technologies (including artificial intelligence), and critical materials would enhance the EU's strategic autonomy and reduce dependencies on systemic rival actors.

From a security and defence perspective, alignment with the CFSP and convergence in decision-making have become key credibility benchmarks. Enlargement must strengthen, rather than dilute, the EU's political and strategic coherence—particularly in relation to the sanctions regime and deterrence posture.

Internal constraints of the EU: the triple feasibility equation (efficiency – resources – democracy). On the EU's side, the 2025–2029 window is defined by a threefold test of feasibility, balancing institutional efficiency, resource adequacy, and democratic legitimacy. Maintaining decision-making capacity within a potentially enlarged Union requires the rationalization of procedures, including the strategic use of *passerelle clauses* to enable the transition from unanimity to qualified majority voting in specific policy areas, thus preventing paralyzing vetoes. The adequacy of the EU budget and its investment instruments must align with the Union's ambitions in the fields of competitiveness, green and digital transition, and defence, while the recalibration of pre-accession instruments should ensure genuine, rather than merely formal, convergence. Safeguarding democratic legitimacy in the eyes of citizens must proceed in parallel with the fight against disinformation and external interference.

At the institutional level, the European Council has established a roadmap for internal reforms and requested the European Commission to conduct a comprehensive review in 2025 along four axes—values and rule of law, policies, budget, and governance.

The pragmatic conclusion for the period 2025–2029 suggests a parallel sequencing, whereby internal EU reforms advance in tandem with enlargement steps, in order to preserve the Union's integration capacity. Within this framework, differentiated integration functions as both a pre-accession bridge and a risk-mitigation mechanism. The report recommends activating the instruments of differentiated integration wherever the Treaties permit, such as Enhanced Cooperation under Article 20 TEU and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) under Articles 42 and 46 TEU, allowing groups of member states—and gradually candidate states—to progress together in areas of high interdependence, including defence, justice and home affairs, digital transformation, and energy.

Passerelle clauses may also be employed to extend qualified majority voting in selected domains, thereby lowering coordination costs in an enlarged Union. Functional staging, or de facto staged accession, enables gradual integration into the Single Market, EU networks and agencies, public procurement mechanisms, and competition rules, under clear conditions of conditionality and reversibility. This approach uses differentiation as a transitional technology, offering early and tangible benefits to candidate countries, reducing politicization, and simultaneously preserving EU standards through strict conditionality—particularly concerning the rule of law and alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy—supported by a merit-based evaluation process.

Against this background, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova emerge as the principal geopolitical drivers of the 2025–2029 enlargement agenda. Their progress will depend on advances in judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, economic governance, and alignment with the CFSP. Rapid sectoral integration in the internal market, energy, transport, and digital domains appears plausible, yet the decisive test remains institutional quality, which will determine the sustainability of their integration trajectories.

In the case of the Western Balkans, the report reiterates that prolonged stagnation would fuel alternative economic and political alignments and expose the region to greater instability. Countries demonstrating irreversible progress in the fundamentals—democracy, rule of law, human rights, and good governance—may be granted expanded access to the Single Market and EU funds, as well as bridge mechanisms toward participation in Union programmes, thereby accelerating convergence.

For Georgia, the suspension of accession negotiations on 28 November 2024 has weakened the credibility of its enlargement timeline. A return to a constructive trajectory will require a clear domestic strategic reorientation and firm alignment with EU values and the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Other aspiring states among the "9/10" official candidates are expected to progress at differentiated speeds, depending on their performance in the fundamentals and their administrative capacity to absorb the EU acquis. The period 2025–2029 is therefore best understood not as a simultaneous wave of accessions but as a cycle of conditional acceleration and functional staging. Entry "windows" will be determined by performance rather than by short-term political momentum.

Between 2025 and 2029, EU enlargement will enter a phase of conditioned and differentiated acceleration. The logic articulated in the AFCO report is clear: enlargement represents both a geopolitical strategy and a merit-based policy. The success of this 2025–2029 window depends on a dual synchronization—first, the EU's internal reforms in decision-making efficiency, budgetary policy, governance, and rule of law; and second, the irreversible progress of candidate states in meeting the fundamentals and aligning with the CFSP.

Differentiated integration—through enhanced cooperation, PESCO, the use of *passerelle clauses* for qualified majority voting, and functional staging—provides the technical bridges capable of transforming political ambition into tangible outcomes while minimizing the risks of incoherence or overcommitment. If these conditions are met, the 2025–2029 period could deliver genuine economic convergence, stronger strategic cohesion, and renewed credibility of the European project across its neighbourhood, thereby laying the groundwork for future accession decisions in the years immediately following.

Conclusions. Differentiated integration has become a structural pillar of the European Union, embodying its capacity to adapt to the political, economic, and institutional diversity of both its Member States and its wider neighbourhood. The analysis demonstrates that differentiation does not undermine the EU's unity; on the contrary, it reinforces cohesion through functional flexibility, enabling progress in integration where uniform consensus is unattainable.

Far from representing fragmentation, differentiated integration operates as a transitional governance technology—a mechanism that allows enlargement to proceed in sequenced and conditional stages without sacrificing the Union's legal and normative coherence. In the current geopolitical context, marked by renewed enlargement momentum and overlapping crises, differentiated integration emerges as the key instrument of "conditional acceleration"—a synthesis of institutional pragmatism and meritocratic discipline.

This model enables the parallel advancement of internal reforms and pre-accession steps, providing candidate countries—particularly Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkan states—with a gradual and credible path toward integration through enhanced cooperation, PESCO, and staged access to the Single Market. It thus transforms enlargement into a process of progressive inclusion, anchored in compliance with the rule of law, democratic governance, and alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The findings of the study confirm that the effectiveness and legitimacy of differentiated integration depend on maintaining a delicate equilibrium between interdependence and politicization, ensuring the resilience of institutional frameworks, and upholding the Union's fundamental values.

Looking ahead to the 2025–2029 horizon, differentiated integration should not be perceived as a mere compromise, but rather as a form of institutional innovation that enhances the EU's strategic cohesion, political credibility, and transformative capacity. Properly managed, it can convert the challenges of diversity into drivers of resilience and renewal, reinforcing the European Union's role as a dynamic, integrative, and value-based geopolitical actor in an increasingly uncertain world.

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