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The Role of Civil Society in Re-shaping EU Enlargement Policy in the Context of Geopolitical Changes

The Model for Staged Accession to the EU as a Case Study

Introduction

Since the last expansion of the European Union in 2013, the enlargement policy ceased to be a priority for the Union. This happened despite the civil society organisations' (CSOs) warnings of the perils such a stance might bring. The inability of CSOs to impact the EU's policymaking agenda was a result of the EU's traditional struggles with the inclusivity of non-state actors concerning policy development. With the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, however, the tides have changed. In the midst of geopolitical challenges, EU officials started emphasising that the enlargement policy was back on the agenda. The paper argues that this shift has created a strategic opportunity for CSOs to carve out a more distinctive position within the EU's policymaking process. This was achieved through their robust advocacy for innovative ideas concerning enlargement, thereby positioning CSOs as influential contributors to the evolution of EU policies.

As a case study, the paper uses [the Model for Staged Accession to the EU](#), published in October 2021 and revised in August 2023 by the European Policy Centre (CEP – Belgrade) and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS – Brussels). With CSOs across Europe functioning as multipliers of the original proposal, a critical mass significant enough was generated to compel decision-makers in the EU institutions and EU member states to incorporate the Model's key features into subsequent official proposals of their own. These features are best visible in proposals that refer to the necessity to render the enlargement policy more gradual, structured, dynamic, effective, predictable, and credible. Therefore, by effectively navigating the shift from a lack of prioritisation to enhanced reprioritisation of the enlargement policy, this paper demonstrates that CSOs have played a pivotal role in reshaping the enlargement policy and making the EU's policymaking more inclusive.

To showcase how the CSOs managed to carve out a more distinctive position within the EU's policymaking process, the paper examines the issue across several sections. After this introductory chapter, in *section 2*, the paper examines how CSOs have shaped EU enlargement policy by advocating for reforms and addressing democratic deficits. In *section 3*, the paper provides a description of what the Model of Staged Accession to the EU is, how and under what circumstances has developed in

the past years. This will set the stage for a basic understanding of the Model's premise, tools to overcome challenges, and overall purpose. In *section 4*, the paper engages in mapping out the Model's "life" after its inception, that is, identifying a rough estimate of CSOs that have so far picked it up, discussed it and endorsed it as a way forward. By having circulated, brainstormed, and even promoted the Model across Europe (and beyond), the paper will show that they have contributed to the process of reshaping the EU's top agenda. In *section 5*, the paper identifies key EU documents that have been actually influenced by the idea of Staged accession, including the work of EU institutions such as the European Commission, the European Council, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament, as well as the work of individual member states. The documents include official conclusions, communications, declarations, and non-papers that have so far had a full or partial mention or adjusted interpretation of the ideas originating from the Model, such as the staged/gradual/phased integration of candidate countries into the EU. Although these terms are not conceptually identical, their purpose aligns – to alter the status quo and invigorate enlargement. Finally, *section 6* will provide conclusory remarks, interpreting the findings and reaffirming the thesis of the paper.



¹ This discussion paper is an adjusted and updated version of the paper written by Strahinja Subotic that was [originally published](#) as part of the 2023 Serbian Political Science Association Annual Conference Proceedings, held on 21-22 October 2023 in Belgrade (eds Ivan Stanojević and Nemanja Purić), pp. 291–319.

The Intersection of Civil Society and EU Enlargement

The civil society has traditionally been perceived as one of the basic pillars of contemporary democracies. Seen as an “arena outside the family, the state, and the market”, it is created by individual and collective actions, organisations, and institutions to advance shared interests. In fact, civil society organisations (CSOs)² represent a phenomenon whose width is continuously growing (including different types of organisations such as think tanks, trade unions, women’s groups, youth clubs, entrepreneurial and professional associations, religious groupings, community-based coalitions, academic researchers etc.) and deepening (covering wide-ranging and diverse topics such as democracy, policy development, human rights, good governance, environmentalism, social justice, etc.). On top of that, the types of their activities are proliferating, as their roles include service providing, advocacy/campaigning, monitoring, building active citizenship, and participating in governance processes. Given a valuable combination of their commitment to the fulfilment of their vision and notable expertise and experience as drivers of action and out-of-the-box thinking, their *modus operandi* requires an enabling environment most commonly found in (aspiring) democracies. In fact, whether and to what extent there are conditions for their development and functionality are traditionally perceived as one of the prerequisites “for a democracy to be consolidated”, particularly as they can help start transitions, help resist reversals, and push transitions towards their completion (p.18).

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² The paper deliberately uses the term *civil society organisations* (CSOs) throughout all sections, instead of *think tanks*, for two reasons. First, civil society is a wider term and encompasses the work of think tanks as research-based non-governmental organisations. Although the example of the Model of Staged Accession to the EU has been developed by organisations that clearly brand themselves as think tanks, it is not incorrect to refer to them as CSOs either. The deliberate choice of “CSOs” avoids the potential exclusion of organisations branding themselves differently. This choice aligns with the paper’s focus on analysing broader trends and civil society’s influence on EU policymaking. Secondly, the term civil society is a concept already well established in the EU and the Western Balkans, maybe even more so than think tanks. The former also seems to be more pronounced in the academic literature. In short, opting for a term “CSOs” instead of “think tank” is done purely for practical reasons, while not having any diminishing sense to it in case of the work of think tanks.

Given the seemingly inseparable phenomena of democracy and civil society, the latter’s importance has become undisputed in the context of the EU’s enlargement to the Western Balkans. It is derived from the fact these organisations engage in advocating for the necessary reforms, particularly in the area of the rule of law, including the fight against corruption, reform of the judiciary, advancing public administration reforms, or, in general, holding the government accountable. The activities, however, do not stop there. CSOs have long directed their attention to the enlargement policy, aiming to unlock its full potential. Their objective is to leverage it as a tool for supporting necessary reforms while ensuring an expedited journey towards full membership. Moreover, their engagement has also allowed for the enlargement policy to draw some of its legitimacy, particularly as it is often and still largely seen as an *elite-driven process*. In that sense, CSOs have had a clear normative goal – transforming the societies in line with pro-European values – and a practical one – improving democracy standards and achieving EU membership as the reaffirmation of those standards. Sharing the view that an empowered civil society is “a crucial component of any democracy”, the *European Commission* goes on to argue that it also represents “an essential player in the enlargement agenda”. Consequently, *fostering a conducive environment* for CSOs has become an important pillar of enlargement policy.

Yet, unlike the CSOs that are arguably synonymous with transparency, deliberation, and participatory democracy, the EU itself has long been criticised for the lack of transparency, adaptability to the ongoing needs, and overall uninclusiveness of its policymaking process. Some even go as far as to argue that “democracy has been the elephant in the room of the European integration project since its inception”. Although over the last decades, there has been a push toward more transparency, with an aim to enhance the EU’s democratic legitimacy, the European Ombudsman warns that the issue of transparency – defined as the EU’s “black hole” – comes about mainly because the Council, despite being a co-legislator with the European Parliament, continues to “use old-style diplomacy” for reaching deals in a method that obviously views transparency as an impediment to its work. With these and other related shortcomings at hand, the concept of “democratic deficit” has been a recurring theme in both political and academic debates.

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The same applies when analysing how the enlargement process has been undertaken so far by those in charge of it. CSOs have, in fact, warned that the formal mechanisms of EU integration continue to suffer from an “*executive bias*”, while adding that the limited options for CSOs to formally partake in the EU accession process has, *inter alia*, negatively affected the democratisation of the region (p. 3). Yet, the paper’s basic assumption is that the EU has realised that the very nature of the policymaking process needs, if not to change, to adapt, in order to address the ongoing geopolitical challenges more effectively. Using the example of the CSO proposed, developed, and promoted, Model for Staged Accession to the EU, the paper shows that with the rise of geopolitical challenges, the EU has become more ready, maybe than ever before, to openly consider CSO proposal(s) as a way forward in terms of enlargement policy. Not only has this contributed to fighting the aforementioned uninclusive nature of the EU’s policymaking arena, but it has also allowed as well CSOs to contribute to redefining the enlargement policy. In other words, the basic thesis is that civil society has played a significant role when it comes to influencing policy debates on the necessity of developing new ideas for enlargement, thereby positively contributing to the evolution of the EU’s policymaking process.

Unpacking the Model for Staged Accession to the EU

Soon after Serbia started its accession talks in 2014, it became clear that the EU enlargement policy was not producing the expected transformative effect. A similar trend was obvious in other parts of the region as well. This was visible by the fact that the Commission’s reports have provided basically the same overall preparedness assessment, whereas the Council was thus reluctant to close the negotiating chapters. In order to change the status quo – i.e., an environment conducive both to the growth of authoritarian tendencies in the region and the (malign) external influence³ – the Belgrade-based European Policy Centre (CEP) and Brussels-based Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) have joined efforts to produce a model that would attempt to put an end to this situation. Their collaboration culminated in the publication of the [Template for Staged Accession in 2021](#), with a [revised and improved Template 2.0](#) being revealed two years later.⁴ The Model’s main goal is to incentivise candidates, especially those in the Western Balkans, to start making positive changes on their path to full EU membership, while also addressing the EU’s concerns with regards to the future functioning of the enlarged Union. In other words, the idea was to change the status quo and showcase that with the right adjustments, the enlargement policy can regain its status of the Union’s most successful policy.

³ In a [separate paper](#), the author also argues that the standstill has contributed to the development of limbo states in the region. Introducing it as a novel concept, a *limbo state* is seen as “a state whose leadership’s inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to break free from the status quo becomes its defining feature”. Consequently, the *pro forma* vision remains just a matter of words instead of action; even when reforms are initiated, they lack the transformative impact; and society is left marked by apathy, that is, a feeling of being stuck while being uncertain about knowing where the country will be in the future.

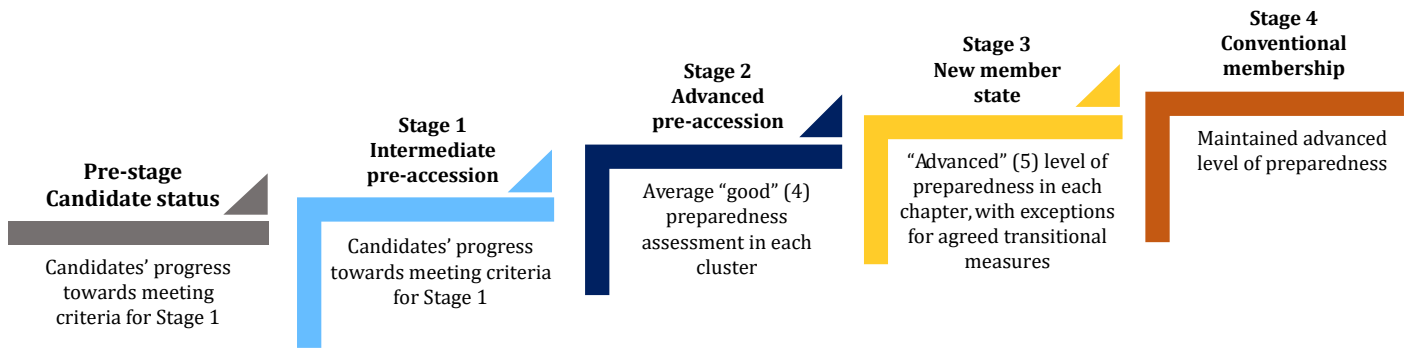
⁴ In Template 2.0, on pages 23 and 24, there is a table that lists all the differences between the original and revised proposals. For the sake of straightforwardness, when referring to the Model for Staged Accession to the EU only refers to the latest version as put in Template 2.0.

Looking at the Model from the candidates’ perspective, it represents a straightforward, structured, and innovative approach, offering gradual access to financial and institutional benefits that resemble those envisioned for EU members. Moving away from the status quo, these increased benefits would get unlocked only if notable progress across all clusters is registered. Using the European Commission’s country reports as the key assessment tool, and upon quantifying their findings, one could transparently track whether a country is eligible to progress from one stage to another. A “stage” is a different name to describe a moment from which a country can become eligible to access the benefits that were previously off the table. In practice, a candidate would need an *average* “moderate level of preparation” per cluster to enter Stage 1 (“intermediate pre-accession” with a rating of 3 on a scale from 1 to 5) and on *average* “good levels of preparation” to enter Stage 2 (“advanced pre-accession” with a rating of 4) (see illustration 1). To prioritise rule of law reforms, the Model requires a *minimum* rating of 3 in each and every chapter in Cluster 1 (*Fundamentals*) for Stage 1 – including subareas such as the Economic Criteria, Functioning of Democratic Institutions, and Public Administration Reform – and a *minimum* rating of 4 to enter Stage 2. For instance, a country excelling in economic aspects but falling short on the rule of law would not be able to acquire the increased benefits. Nonetheless, having well-defined reform targets, the achievement of which would unlock these benefits, would ensure the predictability of the process.⁵

The Model of Staged Accession’s main goal is to incentivise candidates, especially those in the Western Balkans, to start making positive changes on their path to full EU membership, while also addressing the EU’s concerns with regards to the future functioning of the enlarged Union. In other words, the idea was to change the status quo and showcase that with the right adjustments, the enlargement policy can regain its status of the Union’s most successful policy.

⁵ This stands in contrast to the proposals that advocate a sectoral approach akin to “phasing-in”, which refer to the possibilities for the candidates to achieve deeper integration with the EU in specific policy areas, before actual accession to the EU. As the region is already undergoing various forms of sectoral integration – open to all countries regardless of their level of preparedness while lacking predictability and entailing only looser forms of cooperation – the Template 2.0 sees its added value only if these are managed as complementary to the merit-based and gradual incentive regime as per the Model for Staged Accession to the EU.

Illustration 1: Basic Structure of the Model for Staged Accession to the EU (Template 2.0 version)



When it comes to financial incentives, as they progress through stages, the candidates would become eligible for a gradual increase of available funding several times more than they currently get from the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA). According to the Model, a country in Stage I would get access to up to 40% of the funds it would be entitled to as a member state, and 60% in Stage II. Acting as a strong incentive for reforms to be undertaken, the idea behind the increased funding is to assist the countries to put their economies on their feet as early in the process as possible. This approach aims to reduce the existing socio-economic gap between the region and the EU's average. If the gradually increased funds are managed in a manner tailored to **better equip the countries for membership**, the intention is to prepare them to better absorb structural funds upon acquiring membership as well. On top of that, such engagement would assist the EU not only in its efforts to solidify its geostrategic position in the region *vis-à-vis* other external players but would send a message to citizens that the EU perspective is indeed credible, and that the EU is indeed ready to invest in its *future member states*. Given that these benefits are subject to reversibility, any stagnation or regression during the accession process would significantly amplify the opportunity costs.

Simultaneously, as they progress with the reform pace, the candidates would become eligible to get access to EU institutions (albeit without the right to vote). It entails starting to selectively participate in meetings of joint importance (while keeping them regularised and predictable) in Stage 1 and eventually maximally expanding participation in terms of scope and intensity in all EU institutions in Stage 2 – with the vision to facilitate swift and effective political integration and socialise candidates even prior to official membership. In both cases, the meetings would be facilitated based on the **"right of occasional presence"** of third countries in EU bodies. This would include access to institutions such as the Council, the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Commission's Expert Groups, the Comitology, as well as EU Consultative bodies and Agencies. With such an outline, the Model is the first one to provide a doable solution that would contribute to reducing the current asymmetry in the relationship and create a sense of belonging and purpose. With the Model's structure, the possibility of regularised institutional participation turns into a tool for genuine partnership building and a way for the candidates to have their say on policies that will affect them in one way or another.

Box 1. Applying the Model in the Case of EU Council⁶

The application of the Model's proposal for gradual institutional participation can be best illustrated in the case of the EU Council. In practice, the chair would invite a country to attend the session upon the agreement of a simple majority of member states to temporarily remove the obligation of professional secrecy.⁷ The invitee would be able to take the floor and address the member states. Upon exchanging views, it would be required to leave the room. As the invitee would not be able to sit during the entirety of the meeting, particularly not during the voting process, the EU's decision-making autonomy would be safeguarded. At the same time, the proposed benefits would be subject to reversibility, if the undertaken reform commitments are not upheld. In that case, the chair would simply need to decide not to put the notion of inviting the candidate on the agenda. Although there were instances of candidates being invited for discussion in the past, this was only sporadic, rare, and done on an ad-hoc basis.

6 In June 2024, CEP came out with a **revised but more realistic pathway** for involving the candidate countries in the work of the EU Council while accounting for the identified practical needs and concerns of member states. With all of its merits, this proposal is still suboptimal in contrast to the proposal outlined in Template 2.0 for Staged Accession. Nonetheless, as the aim is to ensure smooth and swift realisation of gradual institutional participation, the revised proposal will be sufficient to fulfil the purpose of using institutional participation as an important incentive in the EU's enlargement toolbox.

7 The only exception to that rule is if the invitation to a third party constitutes a political decision affecting the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP); in this case, the decision has to be taken unanimously.

From the conventional member states' perspective, the Staged Accession Proposal gives the EU the additional time to introduce internal institutional reforms while having new member states inside rather than keeping them waiting on the outside.

Meanwhile, what makes the Model stand out is the fact it also looks at the enlargement conundrum from the EU's point of view, offering a way to proceed with the next enlargement while the EU is still in the process of putting its house in order. Namely, it responds to the legitimate concerns voiced by several member states – France particularly – over the future functioning of an enlarged Union. The highlighted risk is that expanding the number of future veto players in the EU, with yet-to-be-proven solidified democratic standards, may hinder decision-making and undermine respect for democratic values. In practice, the solution lies in utilising the Accession Acts to introduce a **temporary differentiation between conventional and new member states**, without harming the EU's legal order.

Namely, according to the Model, once the countries fulfil all the reforms (rating 5), they would enter Stage 3, marking the formal attainment of EU membership. As such, they would take on all membership obligations and most of the rights. The Template 2.0 outlines them as follows:

Accordingly, they would become full participants in the EU's single market and customs union, gain full access to ESIF [European Structural and Investment Funds], and have the possibility of joining Schengen and the Eurozone upon fulfilling the standard conditions. Their citizens would acquire EU citizenship rights and protection, including standing for and voting in European elections. In terms of obligations, all EU legal acts would be equally binding to [new member states] as to any other member, with the Court of Justice of the EU being the ultimate arbiter of any legal disputes that might arise. In addition, [new member states] would also pay [their] mandatory contribution to the MFF [Multi-annual Financial Framework], thus "investing" into the future of the Union like all the rest. Looking at the listed rights and obligations, entering Stage 3 and acquiring the status of a new member would represent a genuine fulfilment of the promised membership perspective.

Unlike the earlier enlargements, however, the new member states would face temporary limitations (up to ten years in the form of temporary derogations) on the exercise of their veto rights in the EU Council. This is the most important post-accession novelty the Model introduces.⁸ Although temporary der-

⁸ It would be accompanied by the expansion of the scope and duration of the *Safeguard Clauses*. Previously utilised in the Accession Acts of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia, the possibility for their activation was limited to a period of three years. Once triggered – by the Commission on its own initiative or upon a request of a member state – it could last as long as the identified concern is not identified. This applied to the Internal Market and the Internal Market, hence the Internal Market Safeguard Clause and the Justice and Home Affairs safeguard clause. The Template 2.0, therefore, suggests increasing the areas to which new clauses could apply while expanding the duration up to ten years during which these could be triggered. The idea is to provide more robust safeguards that the EU would need to rely on Article 7 as the key way of addressing backsliding, particularly considering the difficulty of it being properly activated as it requires unanimity.

ogations have been utilised since the inception of the EU, with the limitation of the freedom of labour movement notably used since the 2004 "Big Bang enlargement", the limitation of voting rights would go into territory previously untested. For these to work, they need to ensure the principle of equality of member states is not permanently and irreparably harmed. As the derogations would automatically elapse, this **diminishes any fears** of potential and permanent second-class membership, particularly as the proposal ensures its proportionality to the objective that it seeks to achieve.

Put this way, Stage 3 is foreseen to protect both the interests of newcomers and conventional members. As Template 2.0 goes on to say, this regime would not strip the newcomers' potency to influence decisions in the Council, as the new member states' "representatives would be allowed to participate in all Council deliberations and consensus-building processes as well as to vote on all simple and qualified majority issues (including forming of blocking minorities)". Moreover, to mitigate the impact of the temporary derogation on newcomers' core interests – such as harmonisation of taxes, own resources decision, vital security interests) – the Template proposes the introduction in the Accession Treaty of an 'emergency brake' similar to that foreseen in Article 31(2) TEU.⁹ With all this said, Stage 4 takes place upon expiration of all temporary derogations, thus enabling the newcomers to automatically graduate into conventional member states, with their full veto rights included.

Therefore, from the conventional member states' perspective, the proposal gives the EU the additional time to introduce internal institutional reforms while having new member states inside rather than keeping them waiting on the outside. As the proposed exception regime is of a temporary nature, it would also maintain a degree of pressure on conventional member states to ensure the functionality of decision-making with an enlarged membership in the long run. In short, by incorporating these elements as a "compromise" solution between the conventional members and newcomers, the Model offers an effective and legally feasible response to the concerns raised by France and other member states' concerns over the enlarged Union by taking into account the Union's incapability to effectively absorb further countries. This way, the EU would gain the capacity to become a larger but still capable geopolitical force in the rapidly changing world.

⁹ In that case, it would be up to the chair of the Council, in close consultation with the newcomer involved, to search for a solution acceptable to it. If this goes without success, the Council may, acting by a qualified majority, request that the matter be referred to the European Council for a decision by unanimity.

The Spread of the Staged Accession Model Across the European Civil Society Landscape

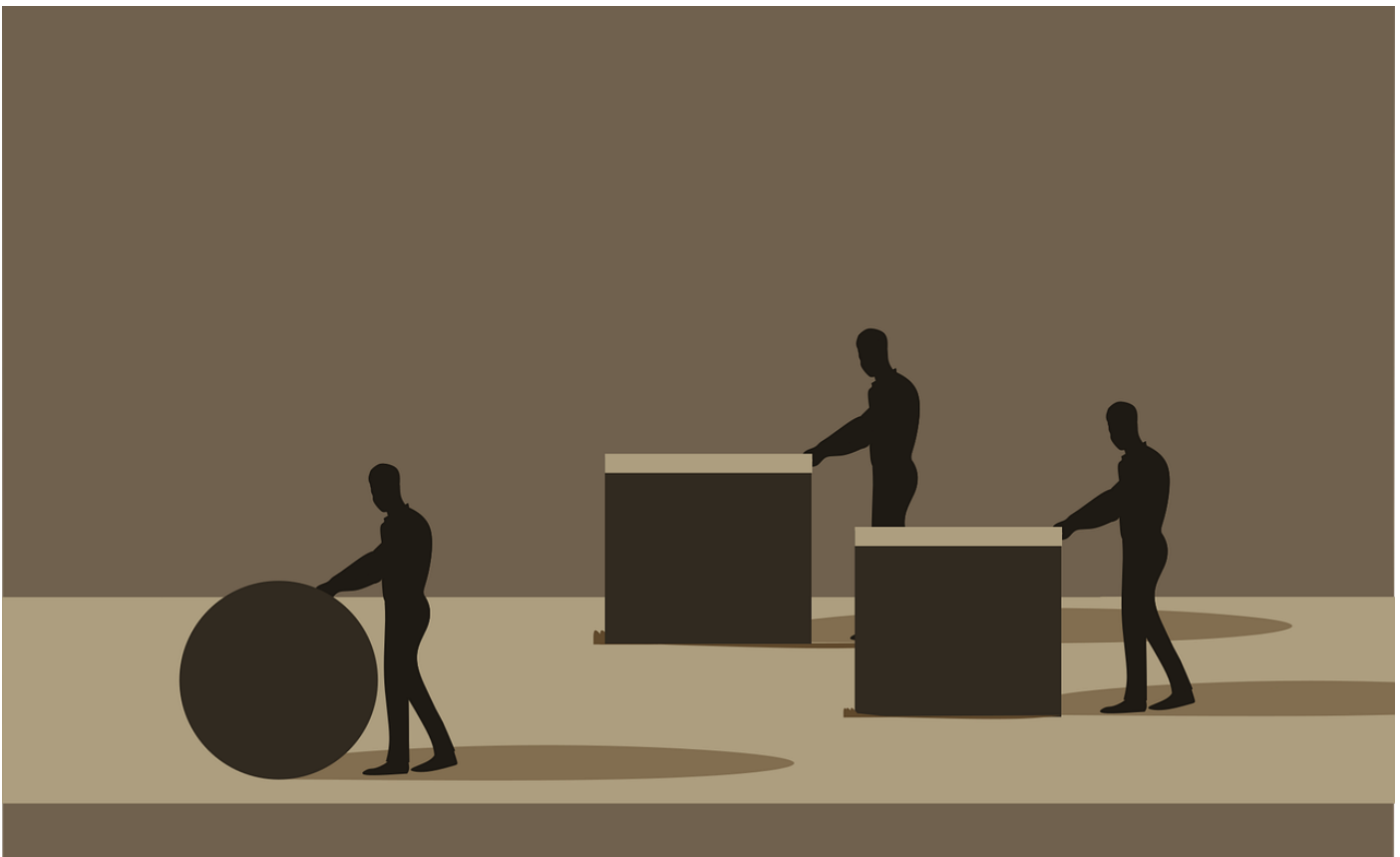
The Staged Accession Model, an initiative born from the collaboration efforts of two like-minded think tanks, owes much of its success to the broad acceptance it garnered within the civil society community across Europe. This was an important stepping stone towards achieving the desired impact on EU policymakers, as it allowed the Model to evolve into a policy framework that transcends the geographical boundaries of candidate countries to which it would primarily apply. Moreover, as enlargement is largely steered by member states in the Council, the deliberate inclusion of the Model in the agendas of various CSOs significantly heightened the probability of it gaining traction among member states' governments. This way, it became an unavoidable point of discussion for policy action.

To understand the extent of the Model's presence in ongoing discussions and how it became a key reference point among CSOs, it was important to engage in a comprehensive mapping exercise via extensive desk research. Such an exercise has involved examining a diverse range of sources, to trace the Model's dissemination, adoption, and influence in various contexts. The findings show that by the end of September 2024, there were at least 184 papers from 30 countries that reflected on the Model, referring to it or quoting it.¹⁰ Among these are reputable organisations such as Clingendael, *Carnegie*, *Europeum*, *German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)*, *German Council on Foreign Relations*, *Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)*, *European Council on Foreign Relations*

(ECFR), and *Atlantic Council*.¹¹ The total list of countries can be classified based on the type of country the paper was published in:

1. *EU Member States*: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden

Of the three groups, this one has been the most influential, considering the proximity to the decision-making process in Brussels and the respective national capitals. This particularly applies to papers that have been most dominant in terms of numbers, such as those in Belgium, Germany, and France. Nevertheless, the fact that the Model has also gained attention from the northern reaches of Finland to the southern territories of Spain demonstrates its ability to transcend regional differences and resonate across varying contexts. Its validity and value as a credible source for enlargement reform are also reaffirmed, given that the Model was covered by CSOs both in enlargement-friendly states such as Austria and enlargement-sceptics such as the Netherlands. Notwithstanding that the governments' positions on this topic do not necessarily coincide with CSOs', and should not thus be equated, the proliferation of the analysis related to the ideas promoted by the Model's authors indicates an accumulation of critical mass that was needed for the discussions to enter EU's policymaking arena.



¹⁰ When the original paper was written, by mid-November 2023, there were at least 101 papers from 28 countries.

¹¹ I hereby express gratitude to Djordje Dimitrov, my colleague from the European Policy Centre (CEP), for assisting me in compiling this extensive list of CSOs.

2. *Candidates and Aspirants*: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo*¹², Montenegro, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine.

Here, two groups evidently arise. The first refers to the “old” candidates and aspirants coming from the Balkans, and the second to the “newcomers” from Europe’s eastern flank. CSOs discussing the Model from the countries listed here have less potential to influence decision-makers in Brussels and member states but nevertheless hold a notable value. For the enlargement policy to produce effective results, it needs to be two-sided, i.e., having an enlargement-friendly (or enlargement-ready) Union while also having interested candidates proactively engaged in reforms that are in line with the EU’s vision and core values. The CSOs coming from this group, therefore, primarily serve the purpose of legitimising the discussions from a local or home perspective. As the Model envisions temporary post-accession limitations for new member states, such as the limitation of veto rights up to a period of ten years while introducing and expanding the number and duration of safeguard clauses, their role gains particular importance. They will be the ones to bear the responsibility of explaining to citizens how both pre- and post-accession stages are going to unroll in practice. At the same time, as some governments might be reluctant to agree on anything that introduces even a temporary differentiation between them and conventional member states, their efforts, therefore, are to include domestic advocacy as well. Only with the acceptance of candidates and aspirants will the Model properly work, and the role of CSOs in making sure that happens is not to be underestimated.

3. *Non-candidate Countries*: Liechtenstein, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Although not the “usual suspects”, CSOs from these countries have a role to play as well. Firstly, all the mentioned countries, although having no will to (re)engage in accession talks with the EU, have nevertheless fully supported the process other countries have had with the Union. This was the case, as the enlargement policy has been seen as a strategic tool to ensure countries located in the courtyard of the Union are both stabilised and turned into credible partners or perhaps even long-term allies. Secondly, these countries already very closely cooperate with the Union, from political, economic, and social standpoints, making it in their interest to continue being engaged in discussions that are related to enlargement. Although they have no official say in the process, they nevertheless can play a role as a neutral arbiter, thus adding another layer of diversity of perspectives when it comes to the Model’s applicability. Finally, as CSO cooperation knows no boundaries, it is possible for CSOs to assist each other in developing a discourse whose focal point will be the necessity to reform the Union’s enlargement policy as part of its larger effort to render it ready to engage with like-minded countries to protect the value-based international order, while providing safety, security, and stability.

Going beyond the numbers, not all of the identified organisations necessarily look at the Model from the same perspective — reflecting the varied contexts, priorities, and vision of these organisations. Some CSOs enthusiastically endorse the model, recognising its potential to address key challenges of

¹² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

Some CSOs enthusiastically endorse the model, recognising its potential to address key challenges of the enlargement policy. Others subject it to rigorous critical assessment, offering constructive feedback and proposals for adjustments based on their on-the-ground experiences. There are also those who just mention it and contrast it with other initiatives without delving deeper into the content. Nevertheless, the diverse spectrum of responses, from endorsement to critical evaluation, has created a dynamic dialogue within the civil society.

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Tracking the Model’s Traces in EU policy documents

Between the EU’s last enlargement in 2013 and the War in Ukraine in 2022, there were no serious attempts to alter the course of the enlargement policy. Although the Revised Enlargement Methodology was revealed in February 2020,¹³ the CSOs have adamantly criticised the EU for leaving it unoperationalised. The only visible difference was the introduction of the clustering system, which was supposed to facilitate the organisation of the negotiating chapters better. Yet, as the opening of a cluster was “one-day news” from the perspective of citizens and decision-makers, the tangible effects of it remained negligible. In essence, the enlargement dynamics

¹³ Curiously, even the Revised Enlargement Methodology was directly influenced by the 2019 French non-paper, which the Template in return influenced for the Staged Accession’s predecessor paper, i.e., the paper called “*Away with the Enlargement Bogeyman*”. The authors of the French non-paper have reaffirmed this, both in private and in public discussions, as evidenced by the author of this paper.

remained entirely unchanged when compared to the period preceding its adoption. Moreover, even though the Model for Staged Accession to the EU was given birth in October 2021, there were no policy breakthroughs. In other words, it was a period devoid of serious policy action on enlargement policy. With the unfortunate war arriving, however, a new window of opportunity was created, as geopolitics was reinstated as an essential part of the EU enlargement equation.

Accounting for CEP and CEPS comprehensive advocacy engagement since the Model's inception, accompanied by the steady development of a favourable and enlargement-friendly discourse by a wider network of CSOs across Europe and beyond, the EU found itself compelled to think creatively and commit to tangible changes. The first ones to follow suit and take action were the Austrian officials, with their non-paper on enlargement in May 2022, just three months after the start of the war. This was an encouraging start, as the non-paper drafted the way forward for discussions on how to gradually integrate the Western Balkans and future candidates into the EU's orbit as soon as possible while keeping the process merit- and reform-based. Their officials have not hidden from the public the fact that the Model was the initiative that led them to take action in the described direction. This was the first time the Model's proposals were featured in a document issued by an EU member state. Soon after, other member states began their own internal deliberations on the matter.

The make-it-or-break-it moment took place during the European Council Summit in June 2022. At that time, it was still uncertain whether the member states would in any way whatsoever endorse ideas of gradual integration of the countries on their path to the EU. Although the Ukraine war opened the doors for the discussions to start, with CSOs filling in the gap swiftly and effectively, the fact the European Council decided by consensus raised fears that some traditionally enlargement-sceptic states would delay the discussion on the matter or shut the matter down altogether. Yet, things unrolled in favour of those who advocate the necessity to change the status quo in a vigorous, effective, and credible manner. Notably, the European Council has not only decided to give the candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova but has called, in Article 16, "the European Commission, the High Representative and the Council to further advance the gradual integration between the European Union and the region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based

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manner". One can easily cross-check the sentence with the wording present in the Model for Staged Accession to the EU and see that there is a clear link between the two. Although the European Council did not delve deeper into the matter, leaving it up to other EU institutions to follow suit (as per standard line of practice in the complex EU institutional setting), it opened the gates for further work on the ideas for gradual integration of candidates to take place. In parallel with the Model's creators' advocacy efforts, not only have more CSOs started to rapidly join the discussion and take part in shaping the currently enlargement-friendly discourse, but member states and EU institutions have shown that they understand the message too.

The adoption of the [Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans](#) by the European Parliament and the EU Council in May 2024, based on the European Commission's November 2023 New Growth Plan (NGP), represented the first attempt to operationalise the Model. The overlap consists of the fact that both insist on the necessity of gradually and conditionally providing additional short- and mid-term financial incentives to candidate countries — in order to serve as a "carrot" to encourage reforms while making the process more predictable and based on merit. Echoing the Model, the NGP introduced the conditionality at the core of the Facility, by requiring the fulfilment of semestral targets set out by Reform Agendas across all clusters, and with particular emphasis on the Fundamentals, as a precondition for the funds to be unlocked. Not only does the NGP incorporate the logic of the Model, but it also follows its example in terms of the size of the total funds.¹⁴ The indicated overlap in the overall logic between the two proposals, even led Gert Jan Koopman, head of Directorate-General Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), to publicly describe the NGP as "[a form of Staged Accession](#)". Building upon such a breakthrough, the EU has yet to consider adopting the detailed, merit-based, structured roadmap that is found in the Model, which turns institutional participation into a powerful incentive that is supposed to complement the financial incentive.

In light of these steadily progressing developments, the author of the paper has identified 18 EU documents that propose advancing gradual integration while incorporating the Model's principles. Anyone following enlargement policy and accompanying discussions, at least since the last expansion of the Union in 2013, is aware that this is an unprecedented number of documents on the subject. Moreover, these documents seem to be well interlinked, all converging and leading towards the goal of facilitating *gradual integration* sooner rather than later. This is important, especially given the newfound sense of urgency associated with enlargement, including a more pronounced geopolitical dimension in recent times. Finally, upon crosschecking the table below with the table on CSOs' work, it becomes evident that the positive steps taken by the EU (following the Model's promotion by CSOs), encouraged civil society to further increase the level of their engagement. In other words, a self-sustaining circle was formed, thus ensuring that the topic is here to stay.

¹⁴ The [analysis](#) reveals that the combined size of IPA III and NGP grants fully aligns with the Model's Stage 1 funding levels. Coincidentally or not, with the annual IPA III funds at €1.74 billion, and an additional €400 million from NGP allocations, the WB countries are projected to receive about €2.14 billion in 2025, for instance. Over a seven-year timeframe, this would amount to €14.98 billion, compared to the €14.21 billion projected by the Model.

Table 1 A list of EU Documents adopted in the aftermath of the Staged Accession Model

#	Date	Institution	Documen
1	May 2022	Austria	Non-paper on Enlargement ⁽ⁱ⁾
2	June 2022	European Council	Conclusions ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾
3	October 2022	Chechia Presidency	Non-paper on Enlargement ⁽ⁱ⁾
4	November 2022	Chechia Presidency	Non-paper on Enlargement ⁽ⁱ⁾
5	November 2022	European Parliament	New Enlargement Strategy ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾
6	December 2022	EU-WB Summit	Tirana Declaration ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾
7	June 2023	Friends of the Western Balkans	Göttweig Declaration ⁽ⁱ⁾
8	July 2023	Spanish Presidency	Presidency Programme ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾
9	September 2023	Franco-German & Expert Group	Report on Reforms ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾
10	October 2023	Austria	Non-paper on Enlargement ⁽ⁱ⁾
11	November 2023	European Commission	The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾
12	November 2023	Friends of the Western Balkans	Non-paper on Enhanced Cooperation with the Western Balkans ⁽ⁱ⁾
13	December 2023	EU-WB Summit	Brussels Declaration ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾
14	February 2024	European Parliament	Resolution on Deepening EU Integration in View of Future Enlargement
15	April 2024	EESC	Opinion on the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans ⁽ⁱⁱⁱ⁾
16	May 2024	European Parliament & EU Council	Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾
17	June 2024	European Council	2024-29 Strategic Agenda ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾
18	June 2024	Friends of the Western Balkans	Göttweig Appeal ⁽ⁱ⁾

The identified list of documents can be classified in a threefold manner.

i. Member states' non-papers

Non-papers, in this case, are documents written solely by a member state or a group of them with the purpose of putting on the table their views and suggestions on gradual integration. Documents of this kind are, of course, not binding and rather act as “food for thought” in ongoing policy discussions. So far, this has included, two Austrian non-papers, two non-papers made by the Czech Presidency, and three more developed by the Friends of the Western Balkans.¹⁵ As they are considered to be internal and often classified documents of the EU, their number could be bigger than presented here.¹⁶ Nevertheless, their importance should not be underestimated, particularly when done by a Council Presidency, as these are received and evaluated by each and every member state. Most commonly, these are then discussed in COELA, i.e., Working Party on Enlargement and Countries Negotiating Accession to the EU within the General Affairs Council (GAC). Considering that most enlargement-related decisions are already settled at the working body level, the non-papers discussed there, therefore, have the potential to usher the path for collective and binding decisions to be taken later on.

15 The Friends of the Western Balkans include the following member states: Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

16 Although the existence of non-papers is often leaked to the media, including some bits and pieces of their content, their nature is supposed to be classified. The author of this paper, therefore, cannot and will not be able to reference them as original sources. A simple Google search will lead interested parties towards the news outlets that have made news about them.

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ii. Official policy documents by EU institutions

ii.1 European Commission

The Commission took most time to act in contrast to other EU institutions. On the one hand, the reality shows that it operates as an institution that often follows rather than leads. Although this may sound counterintuitive, considering that the Commission is expected to assume the role of the engine of enlargement, practice has shown that it is often incapable of taking decisive action if there is no critical mass sufficient for it to step out of the traditionally well-established lines. Yet, under the right circumstances, it has demonstrated the ability to engage in creative thinking. In this case, the document of essence is the “Growth Plan for the Western Balkans”, published in November 2023. Building upon the notion that the candidate countries should be assisted in the process of integrating into the EU as soon as possible, under the condition that reforms are gradually implemented, the Commission suggested increasing the funding. The Growth Plan also explored the complementary idea of sectoral integration, offering ways for the candidates to integrate parts of their economies with the EU single market earlier in the process.

The overall objective was to incentivise reforms by linking them to clear reform targets, narrow the socio-economic gap between the region and the EU (using the funds as a top-up to the ongoing IPA), and overall, convey a message that the EU is indeed ready to seriously invest in the future of its “future member states”, as they are now often referred to. Therefore, if the proposal is properly applied, it would indeed present a step forward in rendering the enlargement more gradual and tangible, in line with the Model’s basic premise.

The European Council Conclusions from June 2022 marked a pivotal moment for advancing gradual integration and implementing the Model’s principles in practice. Following the completion of the European Parliamentary elections in 2024, it was essential for the EU to continue operationalising innovative enlargement-related ideas.

ii.2 European Parliament

Although not explicitly invited by the European Council to advance the idea of gradual integration, the European Parliament independently entered the enlargement-discussion arena in November 2022, with its own Enlargement Strategy. Notwithstanding its very limited role in the enlargement process — primarily consisting of the ability to have a final say only at the end of the process while also being engaged in monitoring reforms and issuing its own reports with non-binding recommendations and assessments — the European Parliament has played a relevant role in the ongoing discussions. This is particularly noteworthy considering the speed of adoption, as well as the comprehensiveness, of its New Enlargement Strategy. Like the Staged Accession Model, it discusses the necessity of bringing the benefits early in the process in order to incentivise the reforms and bring the EU back to the citizens’ agenda. This proposed process includes reversibility, wherein institutional (invitation as observers to the European Parliament) and financial (call for increased funds) benefits fluctuate based on progress. Moreover, the European Parliamentary Research Service referenced, in an accompanying document whose aim was supposed to feed the parliamentarian’s discussions, the work done by CEP on enlargement.¹⁷ The fact that the European Parliament was the first EU institution to provide a way forward that incorporated key features of the Model of gradual integration ushered a path for others to follow.

ii.3 European Council

The European Council Conclusions from June 2022 marked a pivotal moment for advancing gradual integration and implementing the Model’s principles in practice. Following the completion of the European Parliamentary elections in 2024, it was essential for the EU to continue operationalising innovative enlargement-related ideas. A clearer sense of direction emerged through the European Council’s Strategic Agenda for

17 In fact, the European Parliamentary Research Service quoted the earliest work by CEP on the gradual integration dating from 2018 that was called “[Away with the Enlargement Bogeyman](#)”. Although not as detailed as the Template and Template 2.0, it nevertheless offered the starting point for the Model’s subsequent development.

2024-2029, which the EU “will follow a merit-based approach to accession with tangible incentives”. The Agenda also outlined that the EU will support the candidates in meeting accession criteria through appropriate instruments and will “use all possibilities to further advance gradual integration”. Importantly, the EU also committed to undertaking the necessary internal reforms to ensure that the Union’s policies are fit for the future and financed in a sustainable manner and that the EU institutions continue to function and act effectively. With efforts to simultaneously deepen and expand, the EU has laid the groundwork for the exponential exploration of gradual integration in the years to come.

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iii. Other EU-related sources

This group of documents is the most diversified one.

iii. 1 Spanish Presidency Programme

The notion of gradual integration in the Spanish Presidency Programme. Although only briefly mentioned, this was the first time any official Council Presidency Programme referred to the idea. This way, it recognised the fact that it has become a part of the mainstream discussions.

iii. 2 2022 EU-Western Balkan Summits

The 2022 Tirana Declaration and 2023 Brussels Declaration went as far as to provide a more detailed overview of how gradual integration could be applied. This way, unlike the documents from the previous summits, these documents gave a more substantive outlook on where the region could be headed in the near future by referring to institutional, sectoral, and single-market integration.

iii. 3 The Franco-German working group of experts on EU institutional reforms

It made a notable attempt to borrow the ideas presented in the Model for Staged Accession to the EU.¹⁸ These include a staged approach to participation rights in EU institutions, additional financial support, a more structural and conditional methodology for sectoral integration (a complementary pro-

18 The Expert Group was originally commissioned by the German Minister of State for Europe and Climate, Anna Lührmann, and French Secretary of State for European Affairs, Laurence Boone with the aim to set the stage for key decisions to be taken both on EU’s internal reforms and for reforming the enlargement policy.

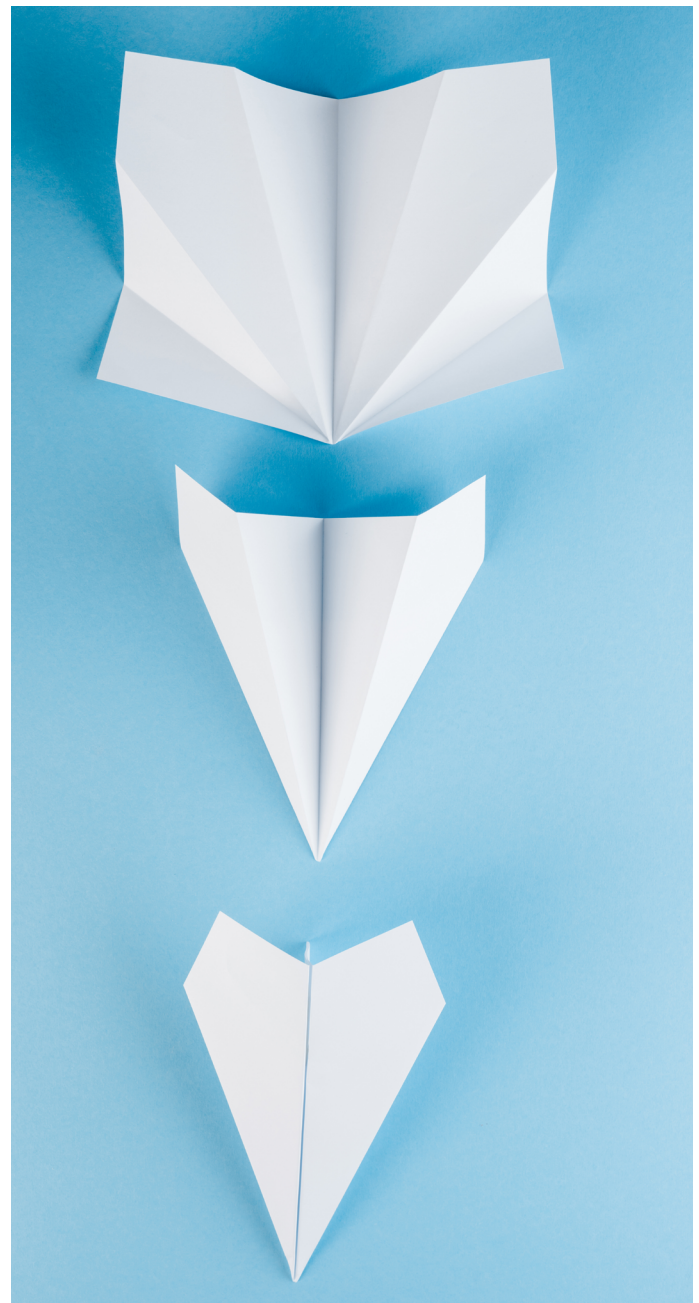
posal mentioned in Template 2.0), reversibility of this partial integration if the EU's principles values, and strategic orientation are no longer met, and QMV for opening/closing negotiating chapters (supplementary proposal mentioned in Template 2.0). They even refer to the idea of setting a target date as 2030 for the EU to complete its internal reforms to be ready for future enlargements — something **CEP did one year before** as a complementary idea to the Model, followed also by the President of European Council, **Charles Michel**. In addition, as all documents have so far focused on the proposals for gradual integration of the pre-accession period, the Expert Group went further and even advocated for a transitory period that takes away their right to vote on future enlargements for a jointly agreed timeframe. Again, this fits with the Model's proposal to temporarily limit the veto rights of new member states, something that Michel also followed up with his proposal of the "confidence clause".

The comprehensive mapping of the Model's presence in CSO work, and EU and EU member states' documents, not only reflects its mainstream integration but also showcases its positive contribution to the evolution of the EU's policymaking process.

In short, these documents have certainly contributed to enriching the discussion. Each borrows ideas from the Model and adjusts them to fit its vision of enlargement.

Conclusion

The Staged Accession Model has significantly and positively permeated the European civil society landscape, securing widespread acceptance and exerting influence in policy discussions. Its success is evident through its adoption as a pivotal reference point in influential EU member states and its resonance across a spectrum of contexts, ranging from enlargement-friendly to sceptical states. The comprehensive mapping of the Model's presence in CSO work, and EU and EU member states' documents, not only reflects its mainstream integration but also showcases its positive contribution to the evolution of the EU's policymaking process, traditionally considered to be insufficiently inclusive. The subsequent endorsement and incorporation of its key features in EU policy documents mark a transformative shift in the approach to enlargement, signifying a self-sustaining circle of engagement between civil society and EU institutions – at least on this topic. This emerging relationship ensures the Model's ongoing relevance and positions it as a guiding force in shaping the future trajectory of EU enlargement policy.



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