

# EU Trio Presidency Rewind: From Spain, over Belgium, to Hungary

To grasp the opportunities of the new EU institutional cycle, one must first examine how the previous one ended. From mid-2023 to 2024, Spain, Belgium, and Hungary led the **EU Trio Presidency** amid geopolitical tensions, economic stagnation, and energy crisis. The EU faced pressure to assert itself while managing enlargement through “gradual integration.” This paper reviews key challenges and offers recommendations for the next Trio to enhance **strategic autonomy**, **competitiveness**, and **enlargement**.



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## Towards applying gradual institutional integration:

Following the successful operationalisation of the financial pillar of the Staged Accession model through the New Growth Plan, the new Trio should find a way to include candidate countries in the work of EU institutions in a predictable and merit-based manner. Poland, as the current presiding country, can use its position to initiate a practice of inviting candidate countries to participate in the work of the EU Council. To make this practice credible and predictable, Poland could agree with its Trio partners – Denmark and Cyprus – to adopt a unified approach and communicate their strategy through a non-paper to other member states. Initially, candidates should be occasionally involved in discussions on mutually important topics within the Council working bodies corresponding to the clusters they have opened. Over time, their participation could expand in both scope and frequency to include the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) and ministerial meetings, specifically in policy areas corresponding to the chapters they have closed, as long as they meet the interim benchmarks for the rule of law chapters. Such a form of political integration would thus fit well with the ongoing efforts to facilitate economic integration prior to EU membership.

## Recommendations

### Strengthening EU unity, security, and competitiveness:

With the challenges of a possible second Trump presidency, the incoming EU Council Presidency Trio must prioritise unity in the Common Foreign and Security Policy by bridging internal differences. Additionally, it must engage with Trump’s administration to secure a long-term solution for Ukraine. Moreover, it needs to ensure funding for joint European defence and additional aid to Ukraine if a ceasefire is not reached. Meanwhile, the EU risks falling further behind the US and China in innovation, threatening its competitiveness, with the gap increasing. With looming US tariffs, the Trio must bolster economic and defence resilience, prioritising innovation over excessive regulation to drive growth in crucial areas such as AI and digital economy.

## A house divided: the EU's widening foreign policy rifts

Divisions among the Trio members regarding support for Ukraine have become increasingly evident throughout the Trio presidency. While the [12th sanctions package](#) was successfully adopted under the Spanish presidency, and the [13th](#) and [14th](#) under Belgium's, securing agreement on the [15th package](#) proved far more challenging. Opposition from two member states nearly derailed the process, highlighting growing fractures within the bloc. Hungary, in particular, continued to wield its leverage in the Council, but the Belgian presidency managed to [by-pass](#) Budapest's veto on a €50 billion aid package for Ukraine in February 2024. However, Hungary later [blocked](#) €6.6 billion in military assistance in May 2024. Moreover, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico each visited Moscow and met with President Vladimir Putin – moves that drew backlash from some European leaders and raised concerns over Budapest's and Bratislava's actual positions towards Moscow. Fico further signalled Slovakia's shifting stance by announcing his intention to attend the 2025 Victory Day parade in Moscow, reinforcing his country's status as a divisive actor on Ukraine. These developments underscored a deepening rift within the EU, suggesting that future efforts to maintain unity on Ukraine will face even greater obstacles, as certain differing national positions and political alignments become increasingly difficult to overcome.

With the start of the war in Gaza, the rifts within the EU have become more pronounced, with member states and even top EU officials taking conflicting positions. Ireland, Spain, and Slovenia formally [recognised Palestine](#) following the outbreak of the war, while European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell publicly expressed [differing views](#) on the conflict. Even within the Trio, positions were sharply divided — Spain recognised Palestine, Belgium advocated for [sanctions](#) on Israel, and Hungary [refused](#) to call for a ceasefire. However, in March 2024, Hungary unexpectedly backed an EU Council [statement](#) calling for “an immediate humanitarian pause leading to a sustainable ceasefire,” marking the first time the bloc spoke with a unified voice on Gaza. Nevertheless, deep divisions persisted, as Hungary and the Czech Republic [opposed](#) the UN General Assembly resolution on Israel in September 2024. These divisions have highlighted the EU's ongoing struggles to maintain a coherent foreign policy, with the Gaza war exposing fundamental weaknesses in its diplomatic approach. The conflicting posi-

tions of member states demonstrate that certain divisions may be impossible to bridge, raising doubts about the EU's ability to act as a unified global player in uncertain times of crisis.

## Strengthening EU competitiveness

Enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy and competitiveness was a key focus throughout the Trio's tenure, consistently ranking among the respective three presidency programme top priorities. In June 2024, the EU adopted the [Strategic Agenda 2024-2029](#), outlining long-term goals to strengthen the Union's economic and geopolitical position. The Belgian presidency played a crucial role in advancing this agenda by drafting the [Progress Report on the Future of Europe](#), to feed the European Council's conclusions on a roadmap for future internal reforms. Meanwhile, the [Budapest Declaration](#) underscored a “pressing need for decisive action” to boost European competitiveness, reflecting a broader commitment to

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reinforcing the EU's economic resilience and competitiveness. In a major financial milestone, the Council approved [mid-term revisions](#) to the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in February 2024, ensuring that funding priorities, such as additional spending in defence and security, sustainable investments or establishing a Competitiveness Fund, align with the Union's evolving challenges and aims. These efforts represent significant progress in improving the EU's economic competitiveness and strategic autonomy, laying a strong foundation for the next Trio to build upon. While challenges remain, the steps taken during this period provide a clear roadmap for enhancing the Union's competitiveness and improving its global position.

As part of its efforts to enhance competitiveness, the Trio focused on strengthening the EU's trade relations with third countries. A significant step in this direction was the [EU-Latin America summit](#), hosted by the Spanish presidency, which aimed to deepen economic ties with the region. One of the key achievements was the conclusion of the long-awaited [EU-Mercosur agreement](#), though France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Austria expressed [opposition](#) to the deal negotiated by the European Commission, bringing its ratification into

question. Progress was also made with [Chile](#), as the EU and Chile signed updated legal instruments on 13 December 2023, modernising their Association Agreement and expanding cooperation in trade and investment. Additionally, a new Free Trade Agreement with [New Zealand](#) was signed in July 2023, marking another success in diversifying the EU's trade partnerships. The economic partnership agreement reached with [Kenya](#) in December 2023 further demonstrated the EU's commitment to strengthening ties with emerging markets. These achievements represent significant milestones for the Trio, bolstering the EU's global trade position and providing better access to new markets. This progress lays a solid foundation for enhancing the EU's economic position and diversifying the block's sources.

In the final stretch of the 2019–2024 institutional cycle, significant progress was made in adopting key legislative documents. With the European Parliament halting work on legislative acts in late April 2024 ahead of the June elections, the Trio effectively accelerated efforts to finalise essential dossiers. Under the Belgian presidency alone, 131 legislative files were successfully concluded, marking a notable achievement. Among the most significant were the [Critical Raw Materials Act](#), aimed at securing the EU's access to essential resources, and several green agenda-related acts, including the [Euro 7 Regulation](#) and the [Net Zero Industry Act](#), which reinforced the EU's commitment to the objectives from the European Green deal and reaching climate neutrality by 2050. Additionally, the [Palma Declaration on Sustainable Tourism](#) highlighted efforts to promote environmentally responsible travel. In the tech sphere, groundbreaking regulations such as the [AI Act](#), [Cyber Solidarity Act](#), and the [European Chips Act](#) were adopted, strengthening the EU's digital resilience and technological autonomy. By successfully closing some of the most important dossiers before the institutional cycle's end, the Trio ensured that the EU's legislative agenda advanced significantly. This outcome can be viewed as a clear success, laying a strong foundation for the incoming institutional cycle to build upon.

## Turning geopolitical momentum into actual enlargement progress

With a concise pledge in its [programme](#) to “take the EU enlargement process forward”, the Trio pursued multiple initiatives over its eighteen-month presidency to translate this commitment into action. Each country of the Trio sought to embed a stronger political steer into the

enlargement process by organising high-level meetings centred on enlargement policy. This practice was introduced with the organisation of an informal ministerial meeting in [Murcia](#) under the Spanish Presidency, where the General Affairs Council discussed the importance of the EU's internal preparation for the accession of new member states. The [Grenada Declaration](#), adopted by EU leaders at the European Political Community Summit in Spain, reaffirmed that the Union needs to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms to be ready for enlargement, described as “a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity”. Furthermore, during the Belgian Presidency, for the first time, a

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presiding member state [invited](#) all aspiring countries to participate in an informal EU Council meeting. Although Hungary did not organise a specific enlargement-focused event, except for a regular EU-Western Balkans Summit and intergovernmental conferences, Budapest used its position to convey [extraordinary COREPER meetings](#) to push for the opening of Cluster 3 with Serbia. Overall, while the approaches varied, each presidency demonstrated an effort to not only keep enlargement high on the EU's agenda but also to make concrete steps towards the accession of new countries.

Throughout their presidencies, each of the three countries worked to build consensus among member states on the progress of candidate countries in their respective accession processes. The Spanish promise of imminent [opening](#) accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova was affirmed shortly after the European Commission's [recommendation](#) that these countries are ready for this step. In the same manner, during the Belgian Presidency, the European Council decided to [open](#) accession talks with BiH right after the Commission [positively assessed](#) its progress. Although ignorant towards candidates from Eastern Europe, the Hungarian Presidency facilitated important breakthroughs in the Western Balkans' (WB) accession process. Namely, two Intergovernmental Conferences were held with Albania under the Hungarian Presidency, which served to open Negotiation [Cluster 1](#) on Fundamentals and [Cluster 6](#) on External Relations. In addition, following the receipt of a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report ([IBAR](#)) on the rule of law in the final days of the Belgian Presidency, Montenegro successfully [closed](#)

three additional negotiation chapters at the end of the Hungarian Presidency. Although Hungary could not persuade other member states to allow the opening of Cluster 3 with Serbia, it found a creative solution in its attempt to unlock the negotiation process with Serbia. Namely, after the Council's approval, the Head of Hungary's Permanent Representation in Brussels sent a [letter](#) to Serbia's EU Mission, inviting Serbia to present its negotiating position for two out of three unopened chapters within Cluster 3. Altogether, it can be concluded that under the last Presidency Trio, intergovernmental EU institutions brought enlargement back to the centre of their debates, while making historic decisions that revived optimism and brought candidate countries closer to membership.

Moreover, delivering on its commitment to moving the enlargement process forward, the Trio Presidency has translated the Commission's New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (NGP) into action. By securing [consensus](#) among member states on the NGP, Spain has delivered on its [commitments](#) to advance the gradual integration of the Western Balkans. Equally important, the Belgian Presidency led the Council through the process of adopting the [Regulation](#) on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility, a key prerequisite for operationalising the Commission's NGP proposal. The Union's decision to allocate EUR 6 billion (one-third in grants and two-thirds in loans) was a significant and commendable policy shift, particularly given the economic and energy crises facing the Union at the time. Signed by the Belgian Foreign Minister on behalf of the Council, the Regulation created a legal basis for WB countries to adopt their respective Reform Agendas, the process overseen by the Hungarian Presidency. Accordingly, five national Reform Agendas were adopted by WB governments and subsequently [approved](#) by the Commission after receiving a positive opinion from EU member states. In this way, the EU fulfilled its promise to stand ready to assist the candidates in accelerating their reform process, by introducing performance-based funding as an incentive for reforms.

By ensuring the Commission's proposal was put into ac-

tion, the NGP, which was publicly described by the head of the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) as "a [form](#) of staged accession", operationalised the financial pillar of the [Staged Accession model](#). As CEP's [analysis](#) showed, the combined size of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) III and the NGP grants fully aligns with the funding levels of Stage I of the Model that was assigned to the candidates with at least moderate preparation levels across all clusters. Anticipating that at least a few WB countries can reach a good level of preparedness required for Stage II of the Model by 2027 when the Re-

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form and Growth Facility expires, it is for the upcoming presidencies to consider a further, gradual increase in the size of the next pre-accession instrument. However, considering that the NGP overlooked the [institutional integration](#) proposed by the Staged Accession model as a complementary driver for an accelerated accession progress, the new Presidency Trio is now tasked with finding a way to enable well-performing candidates to participate in the work of EU institutions. In this way, a credible, merit-based staged accession strategy would strongly incentivise candidates to complete their reform processes and join the EU in the foreseeable future. By ensuring that all pre-accession benefits can be withdrawn in the event of prolonged stagnation or backsliding, the EU would mitigate a key risk of the integration process, while keeping WB countries motivated to continue with reforms.

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