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Political Union First: France's Conditional Embrace of EU Enlargement

France's view on EU enlargement has shifted. In the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and with the ambition of strategic autonomy, Paris has moved from reluctant to engaged. However, as this analysis shows, there is also continuity: France still insists on the functioning of the EU as a political union, strict conditionality and its own role as a central agenda-setter.

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Summary

France’s stance on enlargement of the European Union (EU) has shifted markedly since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Once marked by reluctance, Paris now engages actively with the enlargement debate, but on the condition that it supports institutional reform. Enlargement is framed as a lever to strengthen the Union’s cohesion, safeguard decision-making and bolster Europe’s role as a geopolitical actor.

Institutional effectiveness remains central to French policy. France insists that enlargement must not paralyse the EU’s institutions or dilute integration, a concern also linked to preserving French influence in the EU. Paris has long feared that an overly large and heterogeneous Union risks diminishing its relative weight and weakening the Franco-German engine. Reforms such as extending qualified majority voting (QMV), adopting phased and reversible accession, and reinforcing rule-of-law mechanisms are therefore presented both as safeguards for EU functionality and as means to maintain France’s role as a central agenda-setter. Conditionality remains essential: candidates must show durable progress in democracy, governance and public administration.

Enlargement is also tied to France’s strategic vision of a multi-speed Europe, structured around concentric circles of integration. The European Political Community (EPC) illustrates this approach, offering political cooperation beyond the EU. Overall, France embraces enlargement as an opportunity to deepen institutions, preserve values and build a stronger, more autonomous Europe – while ensuring it retains influence within an evolving balance.

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The opinions expressed in the publication are those of the author.

1. Introduction

France's approach to European Union (EU) enlargement has long been defined by a delicate balance between advancing European integration and safeguarding institutional effectiveness. Historically, French policy has exhibited a degree of hesitancy towards enlargement, particularly concerning the accession of Western Balkan and Eastern European countries. Concerns over migration, economic security and the potential dilution of EU standards and values have shaped this cautious stance. However, recent geopolitical shifts, most notably Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, have compelled France to reassess its position on enlargement. In this context, France increasingly views enlargement as a strategic tool to strengthen European security and counter external threats, particularly in the form of Russian influence in Eastern Europe.

'Macron's tenure has marked a turning point in France's reserved position on enlargement matters ...'

Despite this evolving stance, France remains deeply committed to preserving the EU's institutional efficiency and cohesion. The country has long prioritised internal consolidation over geographic expansion, while remaining wary of the challenges posed by integrating new members without prior institutional reforms. This fundamental concern has remained a consistent feature of French policy, even as its engagement with enlargement debates has intensified under President Emmanuel Macron.¹ Macron's tenure has marked a turning point in France's reserved position on enlargement matters and has been characterised by a more assertive approach that positions France as an active participant in shaping EU enlargement policy,² particularly in response to Germany's clear stance and growing influence in this domain.³

This policy brief examines the evolution of France's position on EU enlargement, assessing both its enduring concerns and recent shifts. The following section traces the historical development of French policy and highlights the transition from passive reluctance to a more vocal demand for institutional reform as a prerequisite for enlargement. Section number three analyses the substantive factors shaping France's stance, particularly its focus on institutional efficiency, democratic governance and the rule of law in accession negotiations. Finally, the fourth section explores how France perceives enlargement as an opportunity for deeper European integration, using institutional reforms as a safeguard against potential disruptions caused by the accession of new member states. The brief concludes by assessing the implications of this positioning for both prospective member states and France's EU partners.

2. From fence-sitting to agenda-setting: the evolving enlargement debate in France

France's stance on EU enlargement has historically been characterised by a preference for deepening integration over widening membership. Since Charles de Gaulle's veto of the United Kingdom's accession in the 1960s, Paris has viewed expansion as a potential threat to European cohesion rather than a vehicle for further integration. This fundamental ambivalence became particularly pronounced following the Cold War, when the perceived trade-off between deepening and widening gained traction in French political discourse.⁴

¹ Bertonecini Yves, and Thierry Chopin (2020). 'Macron l'Européen: de l'Hymne à la joie à l'embarras des choix', *Le Débat*, 2020/1, p. 127.

² De Weck, Joseph (2022). 'Europe Needs Macron to Overcome his Fetishisms', *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 22 September. <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/europe-needs-macron-overcome-his-fetishisms>.

³ Töglhofer, Theresia (2024). *Widening Without Falling Apart: Germany's EU Enlargement Policy*, SIEPS 2024:13epa. <https://sieps.se/en/publications/2024/widening-without-falling-apart-germany-s-eu-enlargement-policy/>

⁴ Bertonecini, Yves, and Thierry Chopin (2020). 'La 'FrancEurope' 70 ans après la déclaration Schuman: projet commun ou projection nationale (I)', *Le Grand Continent*. <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/05/08/franceurope-declaration-schuman-chopin-bertonecini/>

France already exhibited strong reservations towards the EU's 'big bang' enlargement of 2004, which integrated Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. French concerns centred on the economic and institutional impact of expansion, fearing that the admission of states with weaker governance frameworks could strain EU institutions and dilute core European values. This wariness was further reinforced by the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, which was retrospectively seen as premature due to unresolved issues related to corruption and the rule of law. This experience deepened French scepticism about the sustainability of enlargement without prior institutional reform.⁵

A similar ambivalence has been notable in France's dealings with the Western Balkans.⁶ Although successive French governments expressed nominal support for the region's eventual EU membership, this commitment often lacked tangible prioritisation, with Paris investing little strategic capacity into developing targeted approaches to support reform efforts in the region and instead remaining generally content to stand in the second line.⁷ At the same time, French eagerness to demonstrate political capacity at a level equal to Germany has meant that Paris joined new formats such as the Berlin Process early on, albeit without much conviction that accession of the Western Balkans should represent a strategic priority for the EU.⁸ In the wake of Croatia's accession in 2013, and largely with the potential entry of Turkey in mind, a constitutional revision introduced a referendum requirement that could enable French citizens to refuse the ratification of future accession treaties, although the referendum can be bypassed by a three fifths majority vote in both chambers of Parliament (Article 88-5 French Constitution).⁹

'The most recent Eurobarometer poll places France among the countries least supportive of further enlargement ...'

Besides a long-standing political emphasis upon deepening over widening in European integration and an underlying nostalgia for a 'little Europe' (la '*petite Europe*'),¹⁰ France's hesitant approach has been attributed to prevailing negative public sentiment within France regarding further enlargement, as many French citizens harboured concerns about the economic and social implications of admitting less developed states.¹¹ A 2021 poll indicated that 59 per cent of respondents opposed EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans, with many viewing the issue as peripheral to their daily lives.¹² The most recent Eurobarometer poll places France among the countries least supportive of further enlargement, with only 43 per cent of respondents favouring the admission of new member states into the EU.¹³ With concerns over a potential Turkish entry having been among the most prominent reasons for voters to reject the EU's Constitutional Treaty back in 2005,¹⁴ French officials worry that the accession of an unprepared European country might drive public Euroscepticism and act as a brake upon the further pursuit of European integration. When it comes to the region's prospects for full membership, the French approach has thus been shaped by a desire for

⁵ Lequesne, Christian (2007). 'Les élites politiques françaises face à l'élargissement de l'Europe', in *Une Europe des élites ? Réflexions sur la fracture démocratique de l'Union européenne*, ed. Olivier Costa and Paul Magnette, 82ff.

⁶ Wunsch, Natasha (2017). 'Between Indifference and Hesitation: France and EU Enlargement towards the Balkans', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17(4), 541–554.

⁷ Wunsch (2017).

⁸ Töglhofer, Theresia, and Natasha Wunsch (2015). 'France, Germany, and the Countries of the Western Balkans: From Candidates to Partners', in *Opening up the Franco-German Dialogue: How Dialogues Can Enhance European Integration*, ed. Claire Demesmay and Hans Stark, DGAPanalyse no. 6, May: 31–34.

⁹ Lequesne, Christophe (2008b). 'Français et Allemands face à l'Europe élargie: peur de l'infinitude et nécessité de surmonter les angoisses', in *L'Europe Prochaine: regards franco-allemands sur l'avenir de l'Europe*, 133–143.

¹⁰ Lequesne, Christophe (2008a). *La France dans la nouvelle Europe : assumer le changement d'échelle* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po): 74.

¹¹ Andoura, Samy and Yves Bertoncini (2013). 'L'Europe' et ses 'élargissements': stop ou encore?', *Notre Europe*, 27 June.

¹² Lequesne, Christian (2023). 'Les difficultés françaises à penser la grande Europe', *Esprit*, 2023/1 Janvier–Février: 13–17.

¹³ Special Eurobarometer 564 – September 2025. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3413>

¹⁴ Lequesne (2008b).

what officials term ‘controlled enlargement’, which stresses the full preparedness of new member states to avoid any undue interference with the functioning of the EU’s institutions. More generally, France’s enlargement stance is shaped by the idea that a smaller EU is easier to influence and dominate in line with French interests.¹⁵

In a stark demonstration of French enlargement scepticism, President Macron in autumn 2019 chose to veto the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia.¹⁶ This decision wrong-footed France’s EU partners and crystallised French concerns that enlargement policy in its current state was insufficient to ensure the full preparedness of new members for their obligations. Macron’s veto was followed by a French non-paper calling for a thorough reform of the enlargement process that would emphasise stringent conditions and the reversibility of progress towards membership in the case of outright backsliding away from EU standards.¹⁷ As a result of French pressure, the European Commission outlined a new methodology for enlargement in February 2020 that integrated the main French concerns.¹⁸

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine once again led to a shift in France’s enlargement policy. In a departure from its previous hesitance, France is now formally supportive of Ukraine’s EU membership bid. This change is driven by the recognition that enlargement can serve as a geopolitical tool for strengthening Europe’s position in the face of external challenges. Still, the debate within France forefronts the need to balance strategic interests with the imperative to maintain EU cohesion and effectiveness.¹⁹

‘Overall, France has moved from passive reluctance about expanding EU membership to active involvement in shaping enlargement debates ...’

Overall, France has moved from passive reluctance about expanding EU membership to active involvement in shaping enlargement debates, particularly on the Western Balkans.²⁰ Part of this reengagement has been an aggressive advocacy of strict conditionality towards the Western Balkans, which in more recent years has translated into concrete policy changes at the European level. In general, French hesitation is embedded in a broader emphasis upon deepening over widening, with enlargement often perceived as a threat to the achievements of European integration and the interests of core member states. This concern explains why Paris may have seen a need to assert itself more forcefully at the European level by blocking the opening of negotiations with two Western Balkan countries back in 2019 and placing its own interests high on the agenda of EU-level discussions on the future of enlargement.

3. Institutional effectiveness and the rule of law as key concerns

France’s evolving stance on EU enlargement reflects a strategic recalibration driven by geopolitical shifts in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, the desire to secure the EU’s institutional achievements and ensure efficient policymaking

¹⁵ Cautrès, Bruno, Thierry Chopin, and Emmanuel Rivière (2021). ‘Un euroscepticisme à la française: entre défiance et ambivalence, le nécessaire “retour de l’Europe en France”’, Institut Delors, 29 November. <https://institutdelors.eu/publications/un-euroscepticisme-a-la-francaise/>, 41ff.

¹⁶ Chatignoux, Catherine (2019). ‘Paris bloque l’adhésion de la Macédoine du nord et de l’Albanie’, *Les Echos*, 15 October. <https://www.lesechos.fr/monde/europe/paris-refuse-a-lalbanie-et-a-la-macedoine-du-nord-louverture-de-negociations-dadhesion-1140000>

¹⁷ Herszenhorn, David M., and Rym Momtaz (2019). ‘France outlines proposal to overhaul EU accession process’, *Politico*, 17 November. <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-outlines-proposal-to-overhaul-eu-accession-process/>

¹⁸ European Commission (2020). ‘A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process - Commission lays out its proposals’, 5 February. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_181

¹⁹ Cadier, David, and Martin Quencez (2023). ‘France’s Policy Shift on Ukraine’s NATO Membership’, 10 August. <https://warontherocks.com/2023/08/frances-policy-shift-on-ukraines-nato-membership/>

²⁰ Marciacq, Florent, and Romain Le Quiniou (2022). ‘French Engagement in the Western Balkans: Boosting Strategic, Political, Economic and Societal Cooperation’, *Études de l’Ifri*, Institut français des relations internationales, February.

‘A Union that becomes too large and internally fragmented would reduce France’s relative weight in negotiations and make consensus-building more difficult.’

remains central to understanding France’s position on the enlargement dossier. There is a dual dimension to this question: internally, France is eager to preserve the effectiveness of decision-making to avoid a slowdown or outright deadlock of the integration process due to an overexpansion of membership or the growing opposition of certain integration-sceptic members. Externally, such effectiveness is seen as a means to ensure the EU’s independence vis-à-vis third actors – notably towards the United States. With the EU’s strategic autonomy a key desire for France in general and President Macron in particular, the French approach to enlargement seeks to balance the maintenance of internal cohesion with the ability to shape its immediate neighbourhood even in the absence of a clear membership perspective.

The notion of institutional effectiveness in French debates refers not merely to administrative efficiency but to the EU’s capacity to take timely, binding and coherent decisions in line with its political objectives. This capacity, in the French view, is indispensable for two reasons. First, it safeguards the *acquis* of European integration, protecting the internal market, the Economic and Monetary Union, as well as the Schengen area against dilution in a larger and more heterogeneous union. Second, it underpins the EU’s ambition to act as a geopolitical player capable of shaping its external environment without being paralysed by internal divisions. In this regard, effectiveness also has a dimension directly related to national interest. Paris has long sought to play a leadership role within the Union, often through the Franco-German engine. A Union that becomes too large and internally fragmented would reduce France’s relative weight in negotiations and make consensus-building more difficult. Institutional effectiveness is therefore tied to the preservation of French influence inside EU institutions – be it in the Council, the Commission or the Parliament.

This view has translated into a series of concrete reform proposals that France has advocated in recent years. French policymakers frequently highlight the extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) as a central mechanism to strengthen institutional effectiveness. From the French perspective, unanimity in areas such as foreign policy, taxation and enlargement itself is unsustainable in an EU that may soon encompass more than 30 member states. Paris supports the use of the so-called *passerelle* clause to extend QMV incrementally, thereby limiting the ability of individual states to veto collective action.²¹ This position has become especially pressing in light of repeated Hungarian veto threats on sanctions towards Russia in particular. France also links institutional effectiveness to the organisation of the European Commission. A body with one commissioner per member state is, in France’s view, too large to function effectively. Reducing its size or adopting a rotation principle would help ensure more coherent leadership and prevent the fragmentation of portfolios. Similar concerns apply to the Council, where French officials have suggested that the balance of voting weights may eventually need to be revisited to reflect demographic and economic realities more fairly. The main argument is that without such changes, the Union will become too cumbersome to act.

France’s proposals also extend directly to the enlargement process itself. Building on its 2019 non-paper, Paris supports a phased accession model that allows candidate states to progressively integrate into EU policies without enjoying full voting rights until they

²¹ EurActiv (2023). ‘La France et l’Allemagne sont confiantes à l’idée de parvenir à un accord sur la réforme de l’UE’, 23 June. <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/elargissement/interview/la-france-et-lallemagne-sont-confiantes-a-lidee-de-parvenir-a-un-accord-sur-la-reforme-de-lue/>

‘The French concern with institutional effectiveness is closely tied to the ambition of Europe – an strategic autonomy.’

have demonstrated compliance with all obligations. Crucially, accession progress must remain reversible, so that if a country backslides, appropriate measures can be taken to slow down or even reverse progress towards accession. This reversibility is intended to protect the Union from premature commitments that would undermine effectiveness. French policymakers further link institutional effectiveness to financial governance. In Paris’s view, the EU budget must remain sustainable as new, less affluent members join. French policymakers therefore insist on mechanisms that prevent cohesion funds and the Common Agricultural Policy from being overstretched, while at the same time strengthening budgetary conditionality so that EU funds cannot be used by governments that fail to respect the rule of law. In this way, institutional effectiveness is not only about decision-making structures but also about ensuring the Union has the financial means to maintain solidarity without undermining its cohesion.

The French concern with institutional effectiveness is closely tied to the ambition of European strategic autonomy. President Macron has repeatedly argued that the EU cannot be sovereign if it cannot act.²² A Union paralysed by vetoes or internal blockages would be incapable of asserting its interests vis-à-vis other powers. In practice, this means that France sees institutional reforms as a prerequisite for enlarging the EU’s geopolitical reach. Without reforms, enlargement risks producing a Union that is broader but weaker – that is, a Union unable to respond decisively to crises, to coordinate foreign policy or to project stability in its neighbourhood. By contrast, an effective Union would be better placed to manage relations with the United States, China and Russia, while also offering a credible anchor for candidate countries.

Macron’s proposal of a European Political Community (EPC) in May 2022 represents the institutional embodiment of these ambitions. In light of the changed geopolitical context, Macron has been eager to propose ‘a way to think about our Europe, its unity, and its stability, without weakening the closeness built inside our European Union.’²³ Underlining his reluctance to accept enlargement as the only way to resolve tensions in the EU’s neighbourhood, Macron emphasised in his speech that the EU’s leaders have a ‘historic duty, not to do what we have always done and say the only solution is accession’.²⁴ The EPC is designed to foster cooperation in areas such as security, energy, transport, infrastructure and mobility. Overall, France sees the EPC as a practical means to maintain institutional effectiveness by offering structured cooperation with non-members, without overstressing EU institutions. In doing so, it helps extend the EU’s influence and values – rule of law, democracy, human rights – beyond its borders, while preserving the Union’s cohesion.

Alongside institutional effectiveness, compliance with the rule of law is the second key concern shaping French policy on enlargement. Experiences with Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and the subsequent democratic backsliding of Hungary and Poland have convinced French policymakers that enlargement without strict conditionality risks undermining the EU from within. French policymakers are particularly insistent that potential candidate countries align with EU values and principles, with the EPC

²² Groupe d’Etudes Politiques (2024). ‘Emmanuel Macron: Europe—It Can Die. A New Paradigm at the Sorbonne’, 26 April. <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2024/04/26/macron-europe-it-can-die-a-new-paradigm-at-the-sorbonne/>

²³ Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the closing ceremony of the Conference on the Future of Europe, 9 May 2022. <https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20221120120217/https://presidence-francaise.consilium.europa.eu/en/news/speech-by-emmanuel-macron-at-the-closing-ceremony-of-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>

²⁴ Idem.

being seen as a platform for fostering closer ties and cooperation in this regard and thus ultimately a complementary framework to enlargement.²⁵ From the French perspective, the EPC would allow the EU to extend its influence, values and cooperation mechanisms to non-members, while preserving the cohesion of its institutions.

Accordingly, French policymakers argue in favour of a rigid application of conditionality in Western Balkan accessions to ensure candidate countries achieve full preparedness before joining. To reinforce this, France has advocated strengthening the EU's internal enforcement mechanisms. For example, Article 7 TEU procedures should be streamlined to make them politically more usable. Budgetary conditionality linking EU funds to rule of law compliance must also be applied consistently to deter violations and protect EU resources. By insisting on these mechanisms, France seeks to prevent new accessions from weakening the Union's cohesion and credibility. Rule of law conditionality is thus directly linked to institutional effectiveness: without respect for shared values, EU decision-making cannot function smoothly.

In sum, France's emphasis on institutional effectiveness and the rule of law highlights the continuity underlying its evolving stance on enlargement. While geopolitical shocks have pushed Paris towards a more open position, France remains determined that enlargement must not come at the cost of the EU's ability to act. Institutional effectiveness, as understood in French policymaking circles, means protecting decision-making capacity, safeguarding integration achievements and preserving French influence within EU structures. In practice, this entails reforms such as extending QMV, phasing and reversing accession, reducing the size of the Commission and strengthening tools to support the rule of law. Rule of law conditionality further ensures that enlargement consolidates rather than dilutes EU values. This dual emphasis allows France to reconcile its strategic acceptance of enlargement with its enduring ambition to preserve the EU as a coherent and effective political project. By defining institutional effectiveness both conceptually and practically, French policy remains broadly supportive of enlargement – but only if it is coupled with reforms that ensure the Union's cohesion and capacity to act.

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4. Enlargement as an opportunity for institutional reform

From the French point of view, the need to reform the EU's enlargement policy is inseparable from a broader imperative to adapt the Union's institutional structure to the challenges of an expanded membership. French officials have consistently framed the renewed momentum for enlargement – particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – not simply as a question of geopolitical necessity, but as a unique chance to rethink and reinforce the EU's internal architecture. The French position, therefore, has evolved from one of scepticism towards enlargement to a more strategic embrace of the process as a lever to secure long-sought institutional changes within the Union.

This vision became more structured through the Franco-German expert report on EU reform, which was made public in September 2023.²⁶ Commissioned by the respective State Ministers for European Affairs – but without officially reflecting the position of

²⁵ Cadier, David (2023). 'Changes in France's Policies Towards Ukraine and Russia: Implications for Central Europe', Institute of International Relations Prague. https://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Changes-in-Frances-policies-towards-Ukraine-and-Russia_Implications-for-Central-Europe-Cadier-IIR.pdf.

²⁶ *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century* – Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, September 2023. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2617322/4d0e0010ffcd8c0079e21329bbbbb3332/230919-rfaa-deu-fra-bericht-data.pdf>

the French and German governments – the report lays out a blueprint for adapting EU institutions by 2030 in preparation for a possible enlargement that could include Ukraine, the Western Balkans and other candidates.²⁷ One of the central messages of the report is that the EU must avoid repeating the ‘big bang’ model of 2004 and instead adopt a more sequenced and conditional approach, known as the ‘regatta principle’, where countries join based strictly on their individual progress.²⁸ The report posits the aim of getting the EU ready for enlargement by 2030 and sketches a series of adaptations to be introduced below the threshold of treaty change to ensure the continued efficiency of the work of the EU’s institutions. With regards to enlargement specifically, France’s support for an extension of QMV would concern the validation of each negotiation chapter for current and future candidate countries, leaving only the final ratification of an accession treaty under unanimity. The report also emphasises the need for candidate countries to meet the political criteria for membership, including resolving territorial disputes and aligning with the EU’s foreign policy.²⁹

These reform debates are linked to France’s longstanding preference for a multi-speed Europe, or what some French officials describe as concentric circles of integration. Enlargement is often portrayed in France as threatening to dilute the political union that lies at the heart of the EU project. Differentiated integration offers a way to reconcile widening and deepening. By institutionalising several levels of integration – ranging from a tightly bound core of states committed to political union, to looser rings focused on market access or security cooperation – France can support enlargement without sacrificing its vision of a more federal and cohesive core Europe. Macron himself endorsed this vision in his August 2023 speech to French ambassadors, explicitly supporting the development of a ‘multi-speed Europe’ where integration-friendly states would not be held back by more reluctant members.³⁰ Most recently, during a joint visit to Moldova with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in August 2025, French President Macron affirmed that the EU accession path is ‘demanding’, but it offers a ‘historic chance for prosperity and security’ to those countries seeking to integrate the Union, thus underscoring the French emphasis on the preparedness of candidate countries as a way to preserve the Union’s cohesion and avoid the risk of overstretching.

The French strategy, then, is one of conditional openness. Enlargement is acceptable, even desirable, provided it serves as a lever for institutional reforms that guarantee effectiveness, preserve the possibility of differentiated integration and strengthen the EU’s autonomy. This positioning allows France to move beyond its traditional image as a sceptical or obstructive actor on enlargement, presenting itself instead as a constructive agenda-setter. Yet it also reflects continuity: Paris continues to see deepening and widening as inherently linked, and it is determined that enlargement should never come at the expense of Europe’s identity as a political union.

‘The French strategy, then, is one of conditional openness.’

²⁷ Malingre, Virginie (2023). ‘Elargissement de l’Union européenne: la France et l’Allemagne tentent d’orienter le débat’, *Le Monde* 19 September. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/09/19/elargissement-de-l-union-europeenne-la-france-et-l-allemande-tendent-d-orienter-le-debat_6189953_3210.html

²⁸ Ivković, Aleksandar (2022). ‘Macron’s European Political Community: What Would It Mean for the Western Balkans?’, *European Western Balkans*, 16 May. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/05/16/macrons-european-political-community-what-would-it-mean-for-the-western-balkans/>

²⁹ Politico (2023), ‘France and Germany back four-speed Europe’, 19 September. <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-germany-europe-enlargement-accession-ukraine/>

³⁰ Macron, Emmanuel (2023). ‘Conférence des Ambassadrices et des Ambassadeurs: le discours du Président’, 28 August. <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-21581-fr.pdf>

5. Conclusion

France's evolving stance on EU enlargement reflects a delicate recalibration – a stepping away from entrenched scepticism while steadfastly anchoring enlargement to institutional reform. Under the pressure of the shifting consensus towards a speeding up of the enlargement process towards Ukraine, but also the Western Balkans, France has strategically adjusted to the new geopolitical realities. With Russia's war in Ukraine catalysing a shift, Paris now frames enlargement not as a risk to be managed, but as a tool to reform and strengthen the Union's institutional architecture. At its core, this approach serves three interconnected strategic interests: preserving institutional cohesion, pursuing European strategic autonomy and advancing a multi-speed/concentric model of integration that aligns with France's vision of Europe as a political union.

First and foremost, institutional reform is key to France's ambition to ensure the EU can act decisively on the global stage. Rather than wholeheartedly embracing a revival of EU enlargement, France has focused on developing flanking measures that would cushion the impact of a further expansion of EU membership upon the core integration project. Proposals such as extending QMV, streamlining the European Commission and safeguarding financial sustainability reinforce the EU's capacity to act, which is a key element of France's strategic autonomy.

Second, the concept of a multi-speed Europe remains central to France's integration strategy. In this schema, institutions like the EPC serve as outer rings – forums for political cooperation, stability and dialogue – without compromising the EU's institutional integrity.³¹ France presents the EPC as a complement, not a substitute, for enlargement. Its focus on informal, high-level political dialogue among up to 47 heads of state allows France to emphasise institutional cohesion while deepening the EU's neighbourhood ties.

Third, France has actively promoted staged accession models and a shift away from the old 'big bang' paradigm. Instead, gradual accession foresees a framework in which candidate countries achieve 'associated state' status – a transitional, reversible institutional recognition with participation rights (e.g. in selected EU policies or programmes, but no voting) – as they progress towards full membership.³² This model addresses concerns over integration capacity and allows mutual adaptation, thus reinforcing both effectiveness and legitimacy.

Ultimately, France's repositioned stance strikes a balance between openness and caution. Enlargement is no longer opposed; it is shaped. France now presents itself as a constructive architect, conditioning enlargement on institutional reform, differentiated integration and strategic autonomy. By advocating for a model of 'controlled enlargement', France seeks to balance its traditional emphasis on deepening with the realities of an expanding Union. At the same time, this approach reflects a concern with preserving French influence inside EU institutions, because a smaller and more cohesive Union is easier for Paris to shape than a broader and more heterogeneous one. France's insistence on strict conditionality and institutional safeguards therefore serves not only to protect the functioning of the Union but also to maintain France's role as a central agenda-setter. At the same time, this posture

'Enlargement is no longer opposed; it is shaped.'

³¹ Maillard, Sébastien (2023). 'Communauté politique européenne, une lancée à consolider', Institut Delors, 7 November. https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/BP_231106_CPE_Maillard_FR.pdf

³² Macek, Lukáš (2023). 'Pour une adhésion graduelle à l'Union européenne', Institut Delors, Policy paper no. 290, May. https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/PP290_Adhesion-graduelle_Macek_FR.pdf

means that prospective member states may find France a difficult partner in accession negotiations. At the European level, France's position remains influential, which ensures that enlargement debates remain closely tied to broader discussions on the future of European integration.