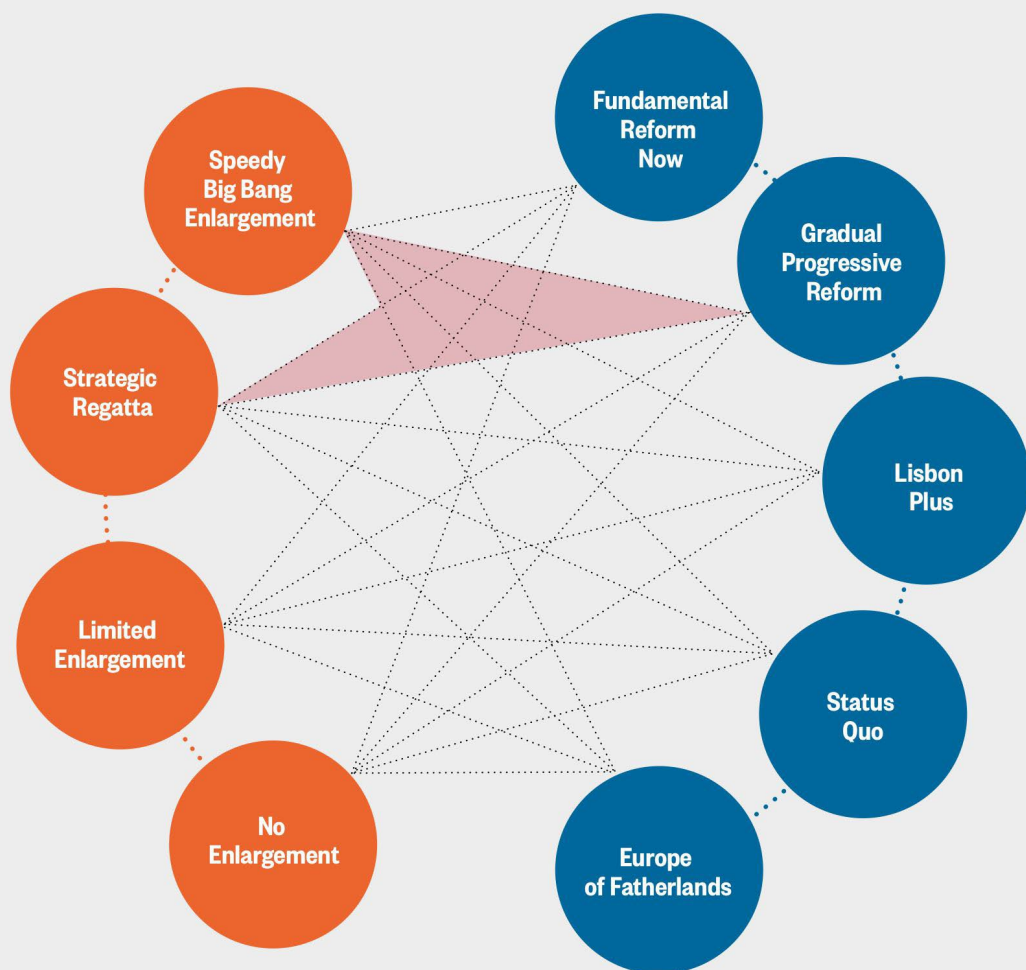


# A TEST OF TIMES

## Permachange through enlargement and EU reform

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## Extended summary

European integration is a story of constant change and evolution. In the past, multiple rounds of widening have gone hand in hand with a deepening of the European Union (EU), always against the backdrop of major historic events. Today, once again, the EU and its members face external (geo-)political and (geo-)economic shocks, major transformations linked to climate, technological and demographic change ('poly-transition'), and fundamental challenges related to the future of liberal democracy. Responding to these dynamics requires embracing the logic of 'permacchange': accepting that the EU27 will have to constantly adapt in response to transformative crises. **To remain relevant in this new era, Europe must pass the test of times by living up to the enlargement and reform imperatives.**

The EU has long recognised enlargement as a geostrategic investment in peace, stability and prosperity on the continent. Yet, over the past decade, **the EU27 has become ever more hesitant to extend the Union's borders**, due to internal preoccupations with the 'permacrisis' – the long series of successive crises since 2007/2008 – and uneasiness with the potential negative consequences of further EU widening.

**Russia's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought back with a vengeance the strategic geopolitical imperative to widen and deepen the Union.** In response to the European *Zeitenwende*, the Union has been strong on rhetorical commitment to enlarge the EU but short on detail of how it plans to reconcile the intention of overseeing a transformative enlargement process with the urgency of enhancing the effectiveness of an EU of 30+ members.

After all, in an era defined by instability, uncertainty, fragmentation and polarisation, upgrading the EU's internal operating system to weather ongoing and future challenges and crises is not just an option but a necessity.

**The prospect of enlargement 'only' reinforces the Union's reform imperative.** The resulting gap between discourse and reality breeds mutual distrust between current and aspiring member states, which in turn hampers progress on EU widening and deepening. Consequently, a change in the *status quo* approach is required to ensure that the enlargement imperative can be squared with the ambition of pursuing a process that exerts reform leverage both on the EU-hopefuls and the Union itself in the years to come.

**But what are the Union's potential strategic enlargement and reform options? And which options should the EU27 choose and implement?** This paper identifies and evaluates four strategic EU enlargement options and five strategic EU reform options, and presents recommendations on how to widen and deepen European integration. These options are not scenarios because they do not aspire to predict the future. Instead, they aim to sketch how EU enlargement and reform could progress based on conscious political choices.

### FOUR STRATEGIC EU ENLARGEMENT OPTIONS

**(E1) Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (Maximalists)** foresees one big wave of enlargement in the coming years, including all aspiring members who demonstrate the willingness and readiness to do what it takes to join the EU. The proponents of this option view one all-encompassing round of accession as indispensable for Europe's security in the current geopolitical environment and argue that the transformative leverage of the policy cannot be restored in time to justify waiting for candidates to meet all the membership conditions prior to entry.

**(E2) Strategic Regatta (Ambitious Realists)** advocates incremental but substantial progress on enlargement starting in the current politico-institutional cycle (2024-2029), with aspiring member states joining the EU in consecutive waves, as they fulfil the conditions set and as the Union itself gradually prepares for their accession. It builds on the existing ‘regatta’ principle and methodological approach to enlargement but broadens the current technical focus of the policy and shines a spotlight on the power and share of responsibility that EU countries have to deliver enlargement.

**(E3) Limited Enlargement (Minimalists)** builds on the assumption that the best way to respond to the geopolitical *Zeitenwende* is to focus on the accession of Ukraine. The advocates of this option argue that the accelerated accession of Kyiv will be an arduous task, and that the Union should save its remaining energy to deal with other key challenges rather than committing itself to a large number of new entries.

**(E4) No Enlargement (Denialists)** rests on the assumption that the EU will or should not enlarge beyond its current borders. Some advocates of this option believe that attempts to widen the EU are not realistic, while others want to actively prevent the accession of candidate countries, given the immense political, economic and financial costs and/or security risks that further EU widening entails.

## **FIVE STRATEGIC EU REFORM OPTIONS**

**(R1) Fundamental Reform Now (Maximalists)** starts from the premise that whether or not the EU enlarges, the Union’s current operating system is not equipped to deal with multiple external and internal challenges. This option advocates for an immediate EU deepening, which encompasses a substantial strengthening of the EU’s supranational governance structures via a European Convention to make it fit for the future.

**(R2) Gradual Progressive EU Reform (Ambitious Realists)** assumes that the EU requires an ambitious but also realistic reform of its key policies and governance structures. It maintains that an incremental reform process, focusing first on what is most feasible and necessary while not excluding more in-depth internal reforms, is also justified given the uncertainties surrounding EU enlargement. Coalitions of the willing should be able to deepen their level of cooperation, even if this might have to extend beyond the EU framework.

**(R3) Lisbon Plus (Cautious Realists)** assumes that the EU is enlargement- and crisis-proof. Its supporters argue that the Lisbon Treaties can accommodate both necessary internal reforms and the absorption of potentially new members by advancing the Union based on provisions included in the existing EU Treaties (including the *passerelle* clauses and the instruments of differentiated integration).

**(R4) Status Quo (Minimalists)** builds on the assumption that the EU can continue to operate without changes to its existing institutional set-up and in line with its current main policy directions. Supporters of this option claim that experience has proven that the EU and its members can successfully weather serious storms on the basis of the Union’s current operating system.

**(R5) Europe of Fatherlands (Re-nationalists)** advocates that the EU should stop moving towards an “ever closer Union” (Article 1 TEU) and that adaptations should be used to re-nationalise competences wherever possible. According to the proponents of this option, the EU should perform a radical U-turn by undoing past mistakes (including Schengen and the single currency) and fundamentally reducing the role of supranational EU institutions.

## LEADING NOWHERE: INSUFFICIENT AND UNREALISTIC OPTIONS

Which of the above strategic enlargement and reform options should Europe follow? This paper argues that **six of the nine strategic options would either not be compatible with the enlargement and reform imperatives or fail the test of political feasibility:**

- **The Limited Enlargement option (E3) would not suffice to make the Union and its vicinity stronger and safer.** It would be interpreted by remaining aspiring member states as a breach of trust which, in turn, would make the EU an unreliable partner, push disappointed candidates to seek alternative alliances and effectively remove the Union's transformative leverage in these countries. The EU's ambitions as a global player would also suffer with this option.
- **The long-term consequences of the No Enlargement option (E4) for both the EU and aspiring member states would be disastrous in strategic and security terms.** If the Union were to bar its doors and leave countries outside to their own fate, it would go against its very *raison d'être*, undermine its strength and image abroad, and likely end up with a less secure, predictable and developed neighbourhood. Most candidates would probably not welcome alternative forms of engagement that stop short of full EU membership.
- **If EU countries followed the radical Europe of Fatherlands option (R5), the enlarging Union would not be able to collectively respond to the manifold challenges and crises which Europe is and will be confronted with in future.** This option would undermine the achievements of European integration and lead to a dangerous re-emergence of nationalism, which is not in the interest of current and future member states.
- **The Status Quo option (R4) would fail to acknowledge that the EU is neither enlargement- nor future- and crisis-proof.** The Union's current governance structures are not strong enough to deal with the unfolding existential (geo-)political, (geo-)economic and democratic challenges. It would be naive and dangerous to believe that the EU will always be able to prevent fundamental crises from spiralling out of control if the Union's operating system remains unchanged.
- While it might be the most realistic reform path, **the Lisbon Plus option (R3) offers no guarantee of the political will among member states to exploit the legal possibilities provided by the current EU Treaties.** Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaties in 2009, the EU27 have been unable to agree on whether or how to use the *passerelle* clauses or the differentiation instruments enshrined in the EU's existing primary law. Whether this will change in future is more than doubtful.
- If the Lisbon Plus option is insufficient and the pressures to reform the EU immense, the **Fundamental EU Reform Now option (E1)** would seem the preferred way forward. However, despite many wake-up calls during the last two decades, **a radical reform of the EU including a European Convention has not been on the cards** and most member states – including both pro- and anti-EU forces – remain (highly) reluctant to follow such an ambitious reform path.

## THE WAY FORWARD: STRATEGIC PATHS TOWARDS ENLARGEMENT AND REFORM

By the process of elimination, one strategic EU reform option – **Gradual Progressive EU Reform (R2)** – and two strategic EU enlargement avenues – **Speedy Big Bang (E1)** and **Strategic Regatta (E2)** – are left standing.

- **The Gradual Progressive EU Reform option (R2) would enable the EU to adapt its operating system with the aim of making it enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof**, while Europe navigates through a highly volatile and uncertain environment in the coming years. A gradual

approach commencing in the current politico-institutional cycle would provide a middle ground, offering the perspective of a potential amendment of the current EU Treaties, a careful adaptation of the EU's operating system, and the possibility for the 'willing and able' to advance if other member states resist an "ever closer Union". It would also allow the EU to adapt its reform path according to the needs of an enlarging Union – whether it expands via the Strategic Regatta or Speedy Big Bang option.

- **The Strategic Regatta option (E2) would allow the EU to interlock its merit-based approach to enlargement with the more recent geopolitical urgency to widen the Union.** The incrementalism defining this option gives hesitant member states time to accept the need to adapt the EU's operating system to new realities and reassures countries that fear the accession of hasty – and thus unprepared – new members. The fact that enlargement and internal EU reform are pursued in tandem creates a virtuous circle in which the two processes reinforce each other. Moreover, the two tracks can be adjusted in terms of speed and ambition in response to the evolution of wider geopolitical developments.
- **The possibility offered by the Speedy Big Bang enlargement option (E1) to integrate all current aspiring member states** that are eager to join can send a strong political signal that the EU is determined to consolidate and secure its sphere of influence in response to tectonic geopolitical shifts linked to developments related to the war in Ukraine and Trump 2.0. This option recognises that pursuing the same course of action and expecting different results is misguided, especially when the geopolitical imperative cannot wait for the leverage of EU membership to start bearing fruits.

**Like the two strands of the Union's DNA, enlargement and internal EU reforms should be thought together.** To make good on its membership promise to the current candidates, the EU must adapt its operating system. But to make its governance fit for the future, the EU should 'think enlarged', towards a Union of potentially 30+ members.

So how can the three identified strategic enlargement and internal EU reform options be applied? This paper puts forward **12 recommendations on how these strategic options and their combinations can be implemented in practice.**

## **SEVEN ENLARGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Enlargement recommendation #1:** The Union and its members should **adopt a new enlargement narrative**, depicting the policy as a means for the EU to mature politically in a challenging geopolitical context and as a way to strengthen the number of allies working together for peace, prosperity, fundamental rights and liberal democracy in Europe.

**Enlargement recommendation #2:** EU countries should **muster the political will to welcome new members in the coming years** instead of focusing on new revisions to the enlargement methodology. A technical process – as strict and rigorous as it may be – will never suffice to deliver a larger EU without strong political resolve, an unshakable vision of a joint future and a lot more generous institutional and financial incentives from the Union.

**Enlargement recommendation #3:** The Directorate-General for Enlargement should lead in the **elaboration of an EU Enlargement Roadmap** to clarify the steps, resources and timeframes that will allow the Union to progress on enlargement in the short to medium term. This Roadmap should be linked to a Comprehensive EU Reform Plan aiming towards concrete and parallel adaptations of the Union's operating system.

**Enlargement recommendation #4:** To ensure that alignment with the EU acquis continues also after countries have joined the Union in the context of a Speedy Big Bang enlargement, the

accession treaties signed and ratified between the EU and each candidate should include clearly defined **Post-Accession Reform Plans**. These Plans should spell out the precise process, key milestones and concrete steps (including their timing) that each country must take inside the Union before it can enjoy all benefits and rights associated with full membership.

**Enlargement recommendation #5:** The EU should **strengthen existing mechanisms and reform Article 7 (TEU) to keep all members on track with the EU's foundational democratic values and principles**. The Union's enhanced approach to the enlargement policy remains more a pre-emptive strategy than a proven system to ensure that pre-accession reforms are sustainable post-accession. Moreover, experience shows the potential exists for any member state to undermine EU democratic standards, not just newcomers. Thus, the Union needs more effective mechanisms to protect its liberal democratic values and constructive European cooperation.

**Enlargement recommendation #6:** Since bilateral issues among aspiring member states and between candidates and existing EU countries can (continue to) disrupt the enlargement process, the Union should **set up safeguards against bilateral conflicts**. It should also introduce a 'Confidence Clause' to prevent new members from blocking new accessions in the future.

**Enlargement recommendation #7:** The EU and its members should **offer more help to bottom-up forces in the candidate countries, including citizens and civil society**. The EU should not only do more to acknowledge and assist citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) in dealing with their domestic grievances. It should also ensure that they are in a solid position to hold domestic political elites to account and contribute to a larger extent to their countries' European integration efforts.

## **FIVE REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Reform recommendation #1:** Preparations for a Gradual Progressive EU Reform require the **elaboration of a Comprehensive EU Reform Plan**, which is more ambitious and concrete than what is currently on the table. To make the Union enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof, this Plan should: (1) adapt the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion policy; (2) upgrade EU financing, both inside and outside of EU frameworks; (3) direct the implementation of core EU priorities, including competitiveness and defence, to the needs of an enlarging EU; (4) elaborate a Dynamic Reform Roadmap with concrete implementation stages and milestones; (5) foster the gradual integration of candidates; and (6) promote a progressive EU governance reform in the years to come.

**Reform recommendation #2:** To inject a new lease of life into the EU reform debate and break the existing deadlock among the member states, the European Council should mandate an independent authority – either a 'Wise Wo]Men Group' or an eminent personality – to elaborate an **EU Governance Reform Report**. The Report should conceptually prepare a reform of the Union's governance structures and help to promote the political buy-in among member states and between EU institutions. The independent authority should be asked to identify which treaty amendments it deems necessary.

**Reform recommendation #3:** To gradually upgrade the enlarging Union's operating system, the EU27 should be **open to all possible reform avenues**. The five reform paths are: (1) technical, functional and governance adaptations; (2) full exploitation of possibilities for reform enshrined in the Lisbon Treaties, including the *passerelle* clauses and the instruments of differentiated integration (enhanced cooperation; PESCO); (3) targeted surgical treaty amendments; (4)

institutional adaptations via EU accession treaties; or (5) fundamental treaty reforms via the ordinary revision procedure, including a European Convention.

**Reform recommendation #4:** If some governments block further EU deepening, the ‘willing and able’ should be able to proceed. If progress cannot be achieved within the EU framework on the basis of existing differentiation instruments, due to the unanimity requirement in the (European) Council, coalitions of the willing should intensify their level of cooperation via the creation of an **Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde (OSGA)** outside the EU framework, while adhering to a set of predefined principles that ensure respect for the Union’s institutional set-up and the community method. Key non-EU partners and potential future member states should be involved as much as possible in those differentiated areas. The creation of an OSGA is particularly urgent in defence and in case some EU governments decide to block enlargement. If some EU leaders would, for example, not allow Ukraine to join the ‘club’, those in the EU who are ready to integrate Kyiv might be compelled to use the possibilities offered by an OSGA to substantially extend their level of support to and cooperation with Ukraine.

**Reform recommendation #5:** To generate broad public debate and buy-in, the Union should elaborate a **Citizens’ Participation Roadmap** allowing citizens from current and future EU members to participate in discussions about the enlargement and EU reform. The Roadmap could include: (1) a European Citizens’ Reform Panel to accompany the EU’s internal reform process; (2) a European Forum on Enlargement to intensify transnational debates about EU widening; and (3) Future of EUrope Debates inviting the heads of state and government of the EU27 and candidates to share their views on the future of EUrope in the European Parliament.

## **A RENDEZVOUS WITH HISTORY**

EUrope must expect the worst and prepare for it without taboos. In this new era, the Union and its members should embrace ‘permachange’, taking on both EU enlargement and EU reform with courage and ambition. By thinking that history was on our side, many leaders failed to foresee, let alone react to, the dramatic turn of events that is transforming our familiar world. Yet the Union and its members still have the chance to get on the right side of history by doing whatever it takes now to secure a liberal, prosperous and peaceful order on the continent. History calls on the EU to respond to the enlargement and internal reform imperatives – but will the Union and its members be courageous enough to come to the *rendezvous*?

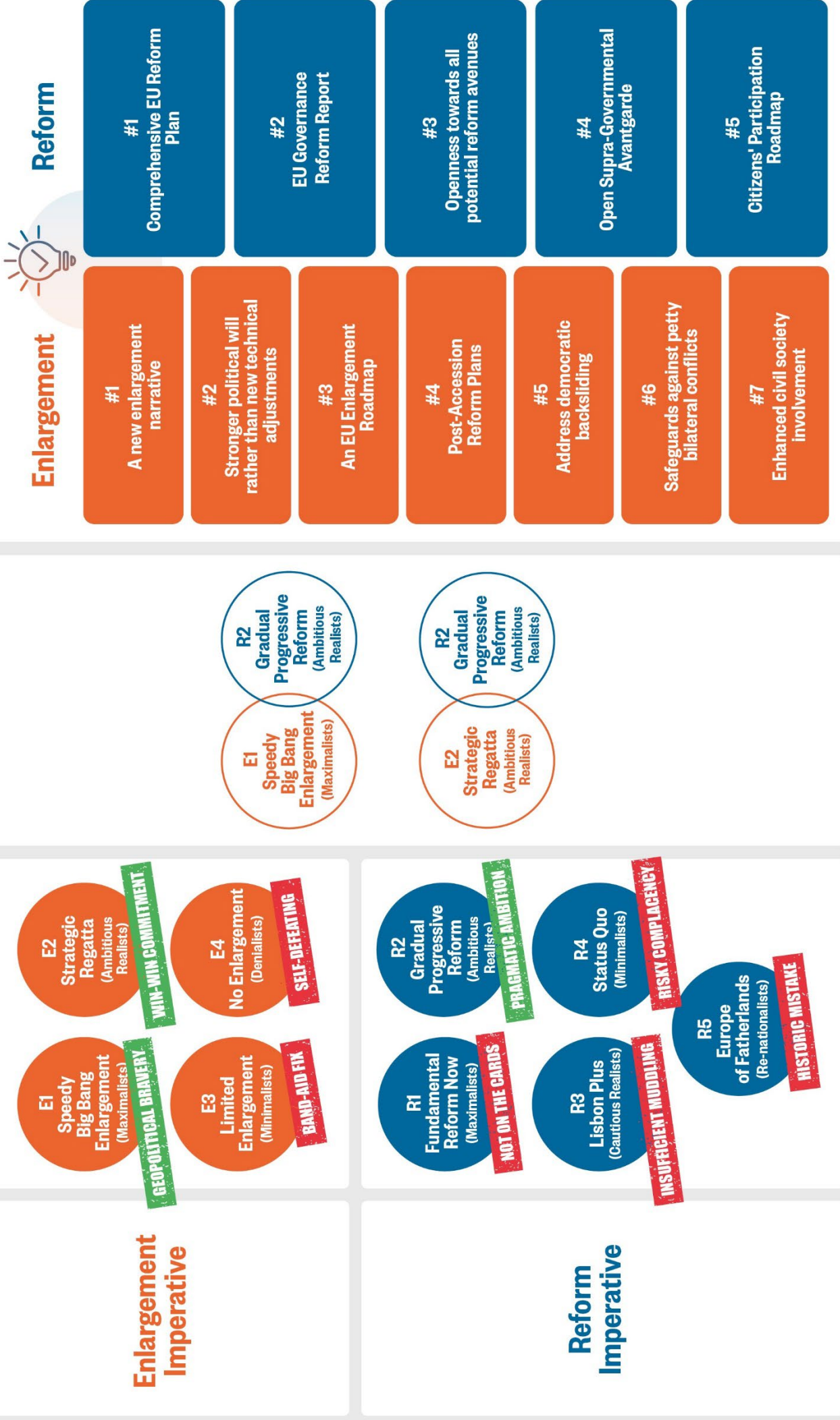
# A TEST OF TIMES - INFOGRAPHIC

## ASSUMPTIONS

## OPTIONS

## COMBINATIONS

## RECOMMENDATIONS



#2

**Stronger political will rather than new technical adjustments**

- ▶ Enlarge during current politico-institutional cycle
- ▶ Strengthen political will to enlarge – technical know-how not missing
- ▶ Openly address key political obstacles
- ▶ Candidates must start head on to deliver good governance

#3

**An EU Enlargement Roadmap**

- ▶ Roadmap follows logic of Strategic Regatta
- ▶ Wave I decided during current cycle (2024-2029)
- ▶ Montenegro and Ukraine part of Wave I
- ▶ EU widening continues after Wave I
- ▶ Final wave(s) aim(s) to integrate remaining candidates
- ▶ Stronger backing of candidates via more substantial and targeted EU support
- ▶ EU Enlargement Roadmap linked to Comprehensive EU Reform Plan

#1

**A new enlargement narrative**

- ▶ Adopt more positive outlook in enlargement discourse
- ▶ Update enlargement narrative to reflect permacrisis
- ▶ Recognise that EU widening and deepening is in the enlightened self-interest of EU27 and candidates



# EU ENLARGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

#4

**Post-Accession Reform Plans**

- ▶ Accession treaties specify potential derogations and transition periods
- ▶ Include clearly defined Post-Accession Reform Plans to ensure alignment with *acquis* after accession
- ▶ Commission keeps monitoring and evaluating new members after entry

#5

**Address democratic backsliding**

- ▶ Strengthen application of existing rule of law mechanism and reform Art. 7 TEU
- ▶ Improve Commission's reaction speed when MS sidetrack from democratic path
- ▶ Stronger and more systematic financial conditionality
- ▶ European parties assert pressure on sister parties deviating from EU values and principles

#6

**Safeguards against petty bilateral conflicts**

- ▶ Address bilateral issues more decisively and creatively
- ▶ Introduce "confidence clause" in accession treaties to ensure new members cannot block future entrants
- ▶ Strike bi- and multilateral agreements solving specific bilateral conflicts
- ▶ Entrust disputes to external mediation

#7

**Enhanced civil society involvement**

- ▶ Reduce executive bias of enlargement process
- ▶ Strengthen bottom-up pressures on domestic political elites in candidates
- ▶ Encourage political elites in candidates to use citizens' consultations on key reforms
- ▶ Decentralise pre-accession aid
- ▶ Involve CSOs in early stages of legislative process and European integration effort

#1

**Comprehensive EU Reform Plan**

- ▶ EU elaborates ambitious and concrete Reform Plan to:
  - enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof CAP and Cohesion Policy
  - enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof all potential forms of EU financing
  - enlargement- and crisis-proof implementation of core EU priorities
  - prepare Dynamic Reform Roadmap
  - foster gradual integration
  - undertake EU Governance Reform

#2

**EU Governance Reform Report**

- ▶ European Council mandates independent authority to produce EU Governance Reform Report aiming to break existing deadlock among EU27
- ▶ Report conceptually prepares governance reforms and promotes political buy-in among EU27 and between EU institutions
- ▶ Two basic options for independent authority: 'Wise Wo|Men Group' or Draghi | Letta | Niinistö Model

#3

**Openness towards all potential reform avenues**

- ▶ Gradual reform of EU's operating system
- ▶ Governance reform open to all potential reform avenues:
  - technical and functional adaptations
  - full exploitation of Lisbon Treaties
  - targeted surgical treaty amendments
  - institutional adaptations via EU accession treaties
  - fundamental treaty reform via European Convention
- ▶ Independent authority identifies potential treaty amendments



# EU REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS

#4

**Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde**

- ▶ 'Willing and able' can progress if some EU governments block EU-wide progress
- ▶ Pro-Europeans do not sacrifice ambition for hollow and illusory unity
- ▶ Coalitions of willing able to deepen cooperation in context of an Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde (OSGA)
- ▶ OSGA particularly urgent in defence and if some governments block enlargement

#5

**Citizens' Participation Roadmap**

- ▶ To generate broad public debate and buy-in, the EU should adopt a Citizens' Participation Roadmap to deliberate enlargement and reform
- ▶ Roadmap includes three instruments involving citizens and representatives from EU27 and candidates:
  - European Citizens' Reform Panel
  - European Forum on Enlargement
  - Future of EUrope Debates