

Integration Before Membership: The Under-Recognised Role of EU Research and Education Programmes in Gradual Integration

ინტეგრაცია წევრობამდე: ევროკავშირის კვლევითი და საგანმანათლებლო პროგრამების არასათანადოდ აღიარებული როლი ეტაპობრივ ინტეგრაციაში

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Abstract

Introduction: The European Union’s enlargement policy has traditionally relied on political conditionality to promote reforms in candidate countries. However, prolonged accession processes and the declining effectiveness of conditionality have increased interest in gradual integration as a complementary approach. Although EU research and education programmes facilitate institutional cooperation and professional networks before accession, their contribution to gradual integration remains insufficiently recognised in the EU’s strategic enlargement framework. **Methods:** The study employed structured qualitative document analysis of five European Commission policy documents: the annual Enlargement Policy Communications for 2022–2025 and the 2024 Communication on pre-enlargement reforms. References were analysed according to four dimensions: political conditionality, gradual integration, market and regulatory integration, and knowledge-based integration. Particular attention was given to the strategic positioning of Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, and Jean Monnet Actions within the Commission’s enlargement policy discourse. **Results:** The findings reveal a shift in the strategic recognition of research and education programmes. In 2022, the Commission explicitly identified participation in EU programmes, including research and education, as a mechanism for accelerating integration. From 2023 onwards, gradual integration became increasingly associated with single market access, regulatory alignment, and sector-specific cooperation. Although all ten enlargement countries participate in Horizon Europe as associated countries, the programme was no longer explicitly mentioned in the main text of the Communications after 2022. Erasmus+ was primarily presented as a means of promoting interpersonal exchanges rather than as a strategic instrument of integration. This pattern indicates the declining visibility of knowledge-based integration within the Commission’s strategic enlargement framework. **Conclusion:** EU research and education programmes constitute an established but insufficiently recognised dimension of pre-accession integration. Their institutional, professional, and socialisation mechanisms can complement political conditionality and market-oriented integration. Explicitly incorporating knowledge-based integration into the EU’s gradual integration framework could strengthen existing cooperation and enhance the strategic value of investments in research and education without requiring substantial additional resources.

Keywords: EU enlargement; gradual integration; differentiated integration; political conditionality; knowledge-based integration; Horizon Europe; Erasmus+; European integration.



აბსტრაქტი

შესავალი: ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პოლიტიკა ტრადიციულად ეფუძნება პოლიტიკურ პირობითობას, რომლის მეშვეობითაც კანდიდატ ქვეყნებში რეფორმების განხორციელების წახალისება ხდება. თუმცა, გაწევრიანების პროცესების გახანგრძლივებამ და პოლიტიკური პირობითობის ეფექტიანობის შემცირებამ გაზარდა ინტერესი ეტაპობრივი ინტეგრაციის, როგორც დამატებითი მიდგომის, მიმართ. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ევროკავშირის კვლევითი და საგანმანათლებლო პროგრამები გაწევრიანებამდე ხელს უწყობს ინსტიტუციურ თანამშრომლობასა და პროფესიული კავშირების განვითარებას, მათი წვლილი ეტაპობრივ ინტეგრაციაში ევროკავშირის გაფართოების სტრატეგიულ ჩარჩოში არასაკმარისად არის აღიარებული. **მეთოდები:** კვლევა ეფუძნება დოკუმენტების სტრუქტურირებულ თვისებრივ ანალიზს. გაანალიზდა ევროკომისიის ხუთი სტრატეგიული დოკუმენტი: ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პოლიტიკის 2022–2025 წლების ყოველწლიური კომუნიკაციები და 2024 წლის კომუნიკაცია გაფართოებამდელი რეფორმების შესახებ. დოკუმენტები შეფასდა ოთხი ძირითადი მიმართულებით: პოლიტიკური პირობითობა, ეტაპობრივი ინტეგრაცია, საბაზრო და მარეგულირებელი ინტეგრაცია და ცოდნაზე დაფუძნებული ინტეგრაცია. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება დაეთმო პროგრამების Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ და Jean Monnet Actions სტრატეგიულ ადგილს ევროკომისიის გაფართოების პოლიტიკაში. **შედეგები:** კვლევამ გამოავლინა კვლევითი და საგანმანათლებლო პროგრამების სტრატეგიული აღიარების ცვლილება. 2022 წელს ევროკომისია ევროკავშირის პროგრამებში, მათ შორის კვლევისა და განათლების მიმართულებით, მონაწილეობას პირდაპირ განიხილავდა ინტეგრაციის დაჩქარების მექანიზმად. 2023 წლიდან ეტაპობრივი ინტეგრაცია სულ უფრო მეტად დაუკავშირდა ერთიან ბაზარზე წვდომას, მარეგულირებელ ჰარმონიზაციასა და ცალკეულ სექტორებში თანამშრომლობას. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პროცესში მონაწილე ათივე ქვეყანა ასოცირებული ქვეყნის სტატუსით მონაწილეობს Horizon Europe-ში, 2022 წლის შემდეგ ეს პროგრამა კომუნიკაციების ძირითად ტექსტებში პირდაპირ აღარ მოიხსენიება. Erasmus+ კი ძირითადად წარმოდგენილია როგორც ადამიანებს შორის კონტაქტებისა და გაცვლების ხელშეწყობი პროგრამა და არა როგორც ინტეგრაციის სტრატეგიული ინსტრუმენტი. აღნიშნული ტენდენცია მიუთითებს ევროკავშირის გაფართოების სტრატეგიულ ჩარჩოში ცოდნაზე დაფუძნებული ინტეგრაციის მნიშვნელობის არასაკმარის წარმოჩენაზე. **დასკვნა:** ევროკავშირის კვლევითი და საგანმანათლებლო პროგრამები გაწევრიანებამდელი ინტეგრაციის მნიშვნელოვან, თუმცა არასათანადოდ აღიარებულ მიმართულებას წარმოადგენს. მათი მეშვეობით განვითარებული ინსტიტუციური თანამშრომლობა, პროფესიული ქსელები და საერთო ევროპული ნორმებისა და პრაქტიკის ათვისება შეიძლება ავსებდეს პოლიტიკური პირობითობისა და ბაზარზე ორიენტირებული ინტეგრაციის მექანიზმებს. ცოდნაზე დაფუძნებული ინტეგრაციის მკაფიო ჩართვა ევროკავშირის ეტაპობრივი ინტეგრაციის სტრატეგიულ ჩარჩოში ხელს შეუწყობს არსებული თანამშრომლობის გაძლიერებას და კვლევასა და განათლებაში განხორციელებული ინვესტიციების სტრატეგიული ღირებულების ზრდას მნიშვნელოვანი დამატებითი ფინანსური რესურსების საჭიროების გარეშე.

სამიზნო სიტყვები: ევროკავშირის გაფართოება; ეტაპობრივი ინტეგრაცია; დიფერენცირებული ინტეგრაცია; პოლიტიკური პირობითობა; ცოდნაზე დაფუძნებული ინტეგრაცია; Horizon Europe; Erasmus+; ევროპული ინტეგრაცია.

1. Introduction

The European Union's enlargement policy stands at a critical juncture. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 sharply increased the salience of enlargement, prompting Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to apply for membership within weeks. The European Council granted Ukraine and Moldova

candidate status on 23 June 2022, while Georgia initially received only a European perspective (European Council, 2022). Georgia was granted candidate status in December 2023, but the course taken by its government from spring 2024 onwards de facto halted its accession process (European Commission, 2024a, 2025). With ten enlargement countries now engaged in the process (European Commission, 2024a), the European Council has once again placed enlargement high on the EU’s agenda, driven prominently by geopolitical motives (Schramm, 2025). Yet the EU’s primary integration instrument - political conditionality - is struggling to deliver the transformative results it once achieved: in much of the Western Balkans, formal progress on the EU path has coexisted with, and arguably reinforced, state capture and democratic decline (Richter & Wunsch, 2020; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020).

In response, scholars and policymakers have turned to gradual integration - the phased inclusion of enlargement countries in specific EU policy areas prior to accession - as a complement to classical conditionality (Lehne et al., 2025; van Hees et al., 2025). This paper argues that the Commission’s framing of gradual integration, although broadening, remains centred on single market access, regulatory alignment and financial incentives tied to reform benchmarks. Largely absent from this framing since 2023 - or mentioned only in passing - is a dimension of pre-accession integration that has operated since the late 1990s and with considerable institutional depth: the participation of enlargement countries in EU research and education programmes, which embed their universities, research institutes, academics and students in European knowledge structures (European Commission, 1999, 2002; Hladchenko, 2026). All ten enlargement countries are associated to Horizon Europe, and legal entities from associated countries participate under conditions equivalent to those of Member State entities unless specific limitations are laid down in the work programme (European Commission, 2026) - irrespective of where a country stands in its accession negotiations. In Erasmus+, by contrast, full association is currently limited to North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye, while the other enlargement countries take part in selected actions as third countries not associated to the programme (European Commission, n.d.-b) - an asymmetry that is itself relevant to the argument developed here.

The paper contends that these programmes constitute a knowledge-based track of pre-accession integration, running parallel to the formal accession process yet under-recognised in how the Commission frames gradual integration. Drawing on a structured analysis of the Enlargement Policy Communications for 2022-2025 and the 2024 Communication on pre-enlargement reforms, it shows that, in the analysed documents, this under-recognition is the result of a shift rather than a constant. The 2022 Communication presented participation in EU programmes and agencies, with education and research and innovation among the areas of engagement, as a way of accelerating the integration of the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2022, Section I). From 2023 onwards, as gradual integration acquired a dedicated architecture centred on the Growth Plans and single market access, research and education programmes were positioned as sectoral cooperation or people-to-people contact rather than as instruments of gradual integration (European Commission, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). The later documents do not abandon the programmatic dimension of the Commission’s 2020 methodology, which envisaged phasing enlargement countries into individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes (European Commission, 2020): they refer to programme participation in general terms and name specific programmes, such as the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand of the European Social Fund Plus, as vehicles of gradual integration (European Commission, 2024b, 2025). What they omit is the knowledge domain specifically. Theoretically, this points to a gap in how conditionality theory (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004), external governance (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009), differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020) and the gradual integration debate conceptualise pre-accession integration. In policy terms, it suggests that the Commission’s strategic framing may be overlooking an already institutionalised and potentially less contentious integration mechanism precisely when complements to conditionality are receiving renewed attention.

Throughout, “enlargement countries” denotes the ten countries currently engaged in the EU accession process: the six Western Balkan partners (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia), Türkiye, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Nine of them are candidate countries; Kosovo is a potential candidate, having submitted its membership application in December 2022 (European Commission, 2024a, 2025). The accession negotiations with Türkiye have been at a standstill since 2018, and Georgia’s accession process has effectively come to a standstill since 2024 (European Commission, 2025). Where a cited source uses a broader or differently bounded category, such as Erasmus+ statistics for the

“Eastern Neighbourhood”, this is noted explicitly rather than treated as synonymous with the set of enlargement countries defined here.

The paper addresses two research questions: (RQ1) to what extent, and in what ways, are EU research and education programmes recognised as instruments of gradual integration within the Commission’s strategic enlargement-policy framing, and how did this recognition change between 2022 and 2025; and (RQ2) how does their positioning compare with market-based instruments of gradual integration, with other EU programmes, and with political conditionality?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Limits of Conditionality in EU Enlargement Policy

2.1.1. The External Incentives Model and Its Early Success

The theoretical foundation of EU enlargement policy rests on what Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004) termed the External Incentives Model (EIM) of Europeanisation: the EU drives change through sanctions and rewards that alter the cost-benefit calculations of candidate governments, offering membership as a conditional reward for compliance with the criteria formalised at Copenhagen in 1993. Research on the Eastern enlargement strongly supported this model: once membership was credibly on offer, conditionality became the main driver of Europeanisation, and the 2004 enlargement appeared to validate the EIM (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). Subsequent research found that, while the EU’s accession conditionality remained consistent after 2004, its effectiveness declined where compliance entailed high domestic political costs, notably in cases involving legacies of ethnic conflict and questions of national identity (Schimmelfennig, 2008).

2.1.2 Why Conditionality Is Faltering in the Current Cycle

That confidence has not been borne out. The Western Balkan process has been characterised by prolonged stagnation and by the coexistence of progress on the EU path with the entrenchment of captured states (Richter & Wunsch, 2020). Several explanations have been advanced. The first centres on state capture: top-down conditionality stifles domestic deliberation, while progress towards membership legitimises the very elites blocking reform, so that conditionality may entrench the conditions preventing transformation (Richter & Wunsch, 2020). A second emphasises credibility: since Croatia’s accession in 2013 the membership prospect has grown remote, and with it the EU’s leverage for political change (Bieber, 2020; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020). A third points to domestic politics: identical incentives produce markedly different outcomes depending on the structure of domestic political competition and the strength of reform constituencies - dynamics the EIM’s rationalist assumptions cannot fully capture (Bieber, 2020; Vachudova, 2005).

2.1.3 Geopolitical Acceleration and the Search for Alternatives

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine added further complexity. Rapid candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova and subsequently Georgia reinvigorated the enlargement agenda but created a disjunction between the geopolitical imperative driving enlargement decisions and the merit-based, conditionality-centred logic that remains the formal basis of accession (Anghel & Džankić, 2023). Several Western Balkan governments have meanwhile cultivated ties with Russia and China even while formally engaging with the accession process (Bieber, 2020) - conditions that question the sufficiency of the external incentives model in the changed context (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020). The EU’s institutional response, the revised 2020 methodology (European Commission, 2020), restructured the negotiations around thematic clusters but remained fundamentally conditionality-based; gradual integration has since gained traction as a way of providing tangible pre-membership benefits, and it is to this concept that the next section turns.

2.2. Gradual Integration: A Promising but Incomplete Concept

2.2.1 Origins and Policy Manifestations

The concept of gradual integration emerged from the practical exigencies of a stalled process rather than from academic scholarship. First floated in a French non-paper in November 2019, it was taken up in the revised 2020 methodology, which envisaged accelerated integration and the phasing-in of enlargement countries into individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes, conditional on reform progress

(European Commission, 2020; Morina, 2025). In June 2022 the European Council, referring to the Western Balkans, called for gradual integration to be advanced already during the enlargement process itself, in a reversible and merit-based manner (European Council, 2022). This translated into concrete instruments - the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the Ukraine Facility and the Growth Plan for Moldova - combining financial incentives with conditional access to parts of the single market (Lehne et al., 2025), alongside inclusion in the Single Euro Payments Area, ‘Roam like at home’ and the EU’s internal energy market (Buras, 2025).

The concept nonetheless lacks a codified definition and a formal link to the negotiating process: gradual integration projects do not depend on the opening and closing of negotiating chapters but on separately defined conditions and funding schemes (Buras, 2025). Assessments of its implementation diverge. Lehne et al. (2025) call for a more ambitious and structured approach, backed by greater financial support; van Hees et al. (2025) caution that, where preconditions such as anti-corruption measures, enforcement capacity and financial resources are not met, such initiatives could undermine the integrity of the single market and EU values; and Morina (2025) warns that gradual integration risks leaving candidates in indefinite limbo if it comes to be seen as a substitute for membership.

2.2.2 The Structural Limitation: A Predominantly Economic Framing

For this paper, the most consequential limitation of the framework is conceptual: its centre of gravity lies in economic integration. Accession negotiations regularly focus on integration into the highly regulated single market and adoption of the *acquis* on the free movement of people, goods, services and capital (Becker & Lippert, 2024), and gradual integration as implemented largely follows the same logic: early access to selected economic benefits in exchange for regulatory alignment. This framing reflects the EIM’s deeper assumption that integration is driven by elite calculations of material costs and benefits (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004): gradual integration disaggregates the membership reward into smaller, more proximate incentives, but remains predicated on the same top-down, elite-centred model of change. What it does not address is how integration can be driven through institutional and professional rather than political channels - channels that may be less susceptible to elite manipulation and potentially more resilient to political change than elite-level commitments.

Where the policy literature does mention research and education, it does so in passing. Buras (2025), for instance, lists Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe among the EU programmes and agencies with which aspiring members already cooperate, and counts student exchange under Erasmus+ among the tangible benefits of gradual integration for citizens; but the programmes appear as items in a stocktaking of benefits, without analysis of their integrative mechanisms or of their place in the Commission’s own framing. That even a policy analysis centred on market access registers them makes their absence from the Commission’s recent strategic documents (Section 6) the more notable. The question of institutional and professional channels therefore directs attention to the participation of enlargement countries in EU research and education programmes, and connects the enlargement debate to the literature on differentiated integration, which conceptualises third countries’ graded, sector-specific participation in EU policies and programmes as a distinct mode of integration operating alongside membership rather than merely preceding it (Leuffen et al., 2013; Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020).

2.3. EU Research and Education Programmes as Integration Mechanisms

2.3.1 External Governance and the Networked Mode of Integration

The framework best suited to these programmes’ integrative function is the external governance approach (Lavenex, 2004; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009), which analyses the extension of EU rules and policies beyond membership. Lavenex (2008) argues that, beyond conditionality, EU influence in its neighbourhood operates through sectoral and networked forms of governance, in which rule transfer proceeds through functional cooperation between EU institutions, Member State administrations and third-country actors, gradually embedding the latter in transnational regulatory and professional communities. It is this networked, socialisational mode that predominates in EU research and education programmes, although, as Section 4.3 shows, it operates alongside - rather than in place of - formal eligibility rules and financial incentives. The framing matters for two reasons: it situates these programmes within an established analytical tradition rather than treating them as *sui generis*; and it suggests why knowledge-based integration may be

less directly exposed to political elite capture than conditionality, since networked governance operates substantially through universities, research institutes, researchers and students rather than exclusively through political elites whose calculations are shaped by regime survival (Richter & Wunsch, 2020). This expectation is plausible rather than demonstrated here: universities and research institutions are not immune to political influence, clientelism or unequal access to EU funding networks, and the paper does not test the durability claim empirically (Section 7.3).

2.3.2 A Deliberate Pre-Accession Policy

Before tracing this history, it is useful to state what is meant by knowledge-based integration, since participation in a programme does not automatically amount to integration. Knowledge-based integration is defined here as the sustained participation of enlargement-country actors in EU-organised research and education structures that produces institutional alignment, recurring cross-border networks and socialisation into shared rules, practices and professional norms. On this definition, participation is a necessary but not sufficient condition: it becomes integrative to the extent that it generates lasting institutional and professional embeddedness rather than one-off or purely transactional exchange.

Research programmes have a longer and more deliberate pre-accession history than the enlargement literature acknowledges. When the Central and Eastern European candidates were being associated to the Fifth Framework Programme, the Commission stated that “participation in EU programmes is an important step towards full EU membership for all candidate countries” (European Commission, 1999). When the candidates signed their association to the Sixth Framework Programme in October 2002, Research Commissioner Philippe Busquin described research as “the first area where enlargement becomes a reality, well in advance of the accession schedule” (European Commission, 2002). The integrative function was thus explicitly framed as pre-accession policy - a deliberate choice, not an unintended by-product. Longitudinal bibliometric evidence indicates that peaks in the collaboration intensity of candidate countries coincide with Framework Programme cycles, suggesting that EU funding instruments help shape collaboration patterns; the same evidence shows, however, that candidate countries remain weakly integrated with the EU-14 core, collaborating more intensively among themselves, with the post-2004 Member States and with Russia (Hladchenko, 2026). Ulnicane (2015, 2023) shows that EU research policy and the European Research Area have been legitimised not only through an economic frame but also through frames of scientific excellence and societal challenges, with EU-level cooperation itself presented as the solution - which implies that participation in these structures carries meaning beyond the economic.

Network-analytical evidence adds further nuance. Blockmodelling of co-authorship networks among European countries between 1990 and 2023 identifies persistent regional clusters shaped by geographical, linguistic and historical factors and persistent disparities despite policy interventions such as the ERA (Ferligoj et al., 2025). Research on horizontal Europeanisation among mobile doctoral candidates points in the same direction: the EU and the ERA contribute to and support horizontal Europeanisation, but many decisive factors lie beyond them (Schäfer, 2021). The evidence thus points to integrative effects that are real but uneven - a pattern that strengthens rather than weakens the case for their strategic recognition, since the documented asymmetries are precisely what a deliberate enlargement-policy framing could address.

2.3.3. The Programmes and Their Integrative Mechanisms

The paper focuses on Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ - the EU’s principal programmes in research and education - with particular attention to Jean Monnet Actions, which operate as a dedicated strand within Erasmus+ rather than as a separate programme. The two programmes operate through distinct but complementary mechanisms and on different legal bases.

Horizon Europe, the EU’s Framework Programme for Research and Innovation for 2021-2027, has the broader reach among enlargement countries: all ten are associated to it, and legal entities from associated countries participate under conditions equivalent to those of Member State entities, unless the work programme lays down specific limitations - for instance to safeguard the Union’s strategic assets, interests, autonomy or security (European Commission, 2026). The continued association of Georgia, despite its de facto halted accession process, and of Türkiye, despite negotiations frozen since 2018, illustrates that programme participation and negotiation progress follow separate tracks. The integrative mechanism is institutional: participating organisations must comply with EU rules on research management, financial administration, data management and ethics.

Erasmus+ operates through a complementary socialisational mechanism, but on a more differentiated basis. Only North Macedonia, Serbia and Türkiye are associated to the programme and can take part in all its actions; the remaining seven enlargement countries participate as third countries not associated to the programme, in selected actions and subject to specific criteria (European Commission, n.d.-b). Participation is nonetheless substantial. Under the heading of international credit mobility, the Commission reports that since 2022 over 30,230 people have participated in Erasmus+ mobility schemes between the four non-associated Western Balkan partners and EU countries, and 29,681 between the wider Eastern Neighbourhood - a category that extends beyond the enlargement countries defined in Section 1 - and EU countries (European Commission, n.d.-d). Other sources report higher figures, which may reflect a broader range of Erasmus+ actions: Buras (2025), for instance, cites some 33,000 Ukrainian participants in Erasmus+ mobility since 2022. Since 2023, higher education institutions from the four non-associated Western Balkan partners can also join European Universities alliances as full partners, and eight institutions from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro currently do so (European Commission, n.d.-d). Within Erasmus+, Jean Monnet Actions, open to higher education institutions worldwide, are the most explicitly normative strand: they contribute to spreading knowledge about European Union integration matters and aim to develop EU studies worldwide (European Commission, n.d.-c, n.d.-d); since 2021, 55 Jean Monnet projects have been managed by higher education institutions from the four non-associated Western Balkan partners, and 303 by institutions from the Eastern Neighbourhood, 254 of them in Ukraine (European Commission, n.d.-d).

2.3.4 Soft Power, Knowledge Diplomacy and the Case for Complementarity

This function connects to the broader literature on educational soft power (Wojciuk et al., 2015) and knowledge diplomacy, which conceptualises higher education, research and innovation as instruments of international relationship-building rather than as technical sectors (Knight, 2022). Examining the cases of Brazil and Russia, Ferreira-Pereira and Mourato Pinto (2021) show that Erasmus+ operates through a bottom-up rather than top-down logic: educational links and alumni networks persisted, and even strengthened, while the EU's strategic partnerships with those countries stagnated at the highest political level. Although those cases concern strategic partners rather than enlargement countries, they point to a potential structural advantage of knowledge-based integration: it may create constituencies for integration that exist substantially independently of the elite calculations that have undermined classical conditionality (Richter & Wunsch, 2020). Whether this integrative function is recognised within the Commission's strategic framing of gradual integration is, however, an empirical question, addressed in the remainder of this paper.

3. Methods

This paper employs structured qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009). The corpus consists of the four annual Enlargement Policy Communications covering 2022-2025 - COM(2022) 528 final, COM(2023) 690 final, COM(2024) 690 final and COM(2025) 690 final - and the Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, COM(2024) 146 final (European Commission, 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). The period is selected because Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks the turning point that returned enlargement to the top of the EU agenda and moved gradual integration to the centre of official discourse (Section 2.3). These documents are the authoritative statements of the Commission's enlargement policy, setting strategic priorities, assessing country progress and framing the instruments through which integration is pursued. The scope of the Communications changes over the period: the 2022 Communication covers the Western Balkans and Türkiye, while Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are included from 2023 onwards. The corpus is complemented, as supplementary material outside the analysed corpus, by the Commission's web resource on promoting education and skills (European Commission, n.d.-d), a DG NEAR news item on the Western Balkans Agenda (European Commission, 2024c) and official information on programme association (European Commission, n.d.-b, 2026).

The analysis is organised around four dimensions derived from Sections 2-4: conditionality, gradual or differentiated integration, market and regulatory integration, and knowledge-based integration. Table 1 presents the classification framework, with the definition, inclusion criterion and an illustrative example for each dimension.

Table 1. Classification framework (source: authors)

Dimension	Definition	Inclusion criterion	Example
Conditionality	Linkage of accession progress or rewards to reform compliance	Reference ties advancement or benefits to benchmarks, monitoring or sanctions	Rule-of-law benchmarks; gradual-integration benefits conditioned on reforms
Gradual integration	Participation in EU policies, markets or programmes before membership	Reference to phased, staged, accelerated or sectoral access prior to accession, including generic references to programme participation	SEPA inclusion; ‘Roam like at home’; association to EaSI
Market and regulatory integration	Access to or alignment with the single market	Reference to single market access or <i>acquis</i> alignment	Adoption of the single market <i>acquis</i>
Knowledge-based integration	Participation in EU knowledge structures	Reference to Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, Jean Monnet Actions, research and innovation or education cooperation, the ERA or the European Education Area	Association to Horizon Europe; Erasmus+ as a people-to-people programme

The unit of analysis is the individual reference, defined as a self-contained textual passage - typically a sentence or clause - that explicitly invokes one of the four dimensions; where a passage invoked more than one dimension, it was classified under each. In a first step, all such passages were identified through a complete reading of each document. In a second step, each reference was classified along two criteria: its structural positioning - whether it appears in passages that set out the architecture of gradual or accelerated integration and strategic tools, or in peripheral passages on sector-specific cooperation - and its functional role within the document’s argument. A reference is treated as strategically central when it is connected to accession incentives or to the architecture of gradual integration, and as peripheral when it appears only as descriptive cooperation, people-to-people contact or technical assistance. To allow a comparison within the programmatic dimension itself, references to participation in EU programmes outside the knowledge domain (for example the EaSI strand, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, or digital and defence-related programmes) were recorded as contrast cases. Because the documents are cited here in their EUR-Lex versions, quotations are referenced by section rather than page. Appendix 1 presents classified passages for each dimension to make the central/peripheral distinction verifiable.

Both authors read the main text of each document in full (statistical and thematic annexes were not analysed); relevant passages were identified and classified along the dimensions in Table 1, and the classifications were discussed and agreed jointly, without coding software or a formal reliability measure (see Section 7.3). Reference counts are not reported, since the classification rests on the positioning and function of references rather than on their frequency. An AI tool (Claude, Anthropic) was used during the revision of the paper to check quotations, section references and bibliographic details against the source documents and to flag additional relevant passages; the authors reviewed the resulting classifications and the final text. Because part of the argument rests on what the documents do not say, an explicit criterion governs the interpretation of absence: silence is treated as analytically significant only in passages that enumerate the areas or instruments of gradual integration; absences elsewhere carry no evidential weight. Finally, the approach cannot measure the causal impact of the programmes on domestic reform, and official documents may contain strategic silences.

4. Results

4.1 The Dominant Framing: Conditionality and a Widening, Market-Centred Gradual Integration

The dominant logic in all five documents is conditionality-based: progress in accession negotiations is tied to reforms in the rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration, anti-corruption and alignment

with the Common Foreign and Security Policy. The 2023 Communication is emblematic, stating that enlargement countries must make “tangible and irreversible progress, starting with the fundamentals of the EU accession process” and identifying the rule of law, fundamental rights, the economy, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform as “the cornerstones of the enlargement policy” (European Commission, 2023, Section I).

Gradual integration acquires a dedicated architecture over the period. In 2023 it appears chiefly through the newly proposed Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, intended to bring forward some advantages of membership before accession (European Commission, 2023, Section V). The 2024 Communication presents progressive integration into the single market as a facilitator, not an alternative, to accession, and lists the measures for accelerated integration launched so far: SEPA applications, Green Lanes, agreements on conformity assessment of industrial products, digital identity wallets, the replication of WiFi4EU, inclusion in the European Digital Innovation Hubs and cooperation under the Critical Medicines Alliance (European Commission, 2024a, Sections I and V). The Communication on pre-enlargement reforms lists the extension of ‘Roam like at home’, preparation for SEPA access, free circulation of certain industrial goods and the opening of selected service sectors as its examples of gradual integration initiatives, and closes each of its policy sections with a subsection on gradual integration covering connectivity, climate and energy, agriculture, economic and social convergence, and security and defence (European Commission, 2024b, Section 2.B).

The 2025 Communication widens the concept further. It describes gradual integration as integration into specific areas of EU policy, “notably parts of the EU Single Market”, reports results in roaming, payments, customs, energy and industrial goods, and names agriculture, trust services, space, healthcare, transport and defence as further areas (European Commission, 2025, Section III.3). It also describes the inclusion of four candidate countries in the Rule of Law Report as an element of gradual integration (Section III.2), and states that the EU has stepped up gradual integration by granting enlargement countries participation in certain policies and programmes before membership, while conditioning its advantages on the pace of reforms and on alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Section I). Research and education are not among the areas listed, and neither Horizon Europe nor Erasmus+ is mentioned in the main text of the Communication.

This operationalisation should be read against the revised methodology, which envisaged the phasing-in of enlargement countries into individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes (European Commission, 2020). The post-2022 documents do not abandon the programmatic dimension: they refer to programme participation generically and name specific programmes - the EaSI strand, transport- and energy-related programmes, defence-industrial programmes, and digital initiatives such as the European Digital Innovation Hubs and WiFi4EU - as vehicles of gradual integration. The gap identified here is therefore not a narrowing of gradual integration to the market as such, but a selective carrying-through of the 2020 formulation from which, after 2022, the knowledge domain is excluded. Table 2 summarises the assessment; Section 6.2 traces the trajectory of research and education in detail.

Table 2. Summary assessment of the analysed documents across the principal analytical dimensions (source: authors’ analysis; see Sections 6.1-6.4)

Document	Conditionality	Gradual integration	Research and education programmes
2022 Communication (Western Balkans and Türkiye)	Central	Not yet a dedicated architecture; European Council call recalled; accelerated integration of the Western Balkans through programmes, agencies and the SAAs	Central: education and research and innovation listed among areas of engagement in accelerated integration; Horizon Europe association of the Western Balkans reported as finalised; Erasmus+ association status and enhanced partnership reported

Document	Conditionality	Gradual integration	Research and education programmes
2023 Communication	Central	Emerging (Growth Plan proposed)	Peripheral: research and innovation only in high-level dialogue with Türkiye; education only in passing (College of Europe office; regional recognition of qualifications); Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ not named in the main text
2024 Communication	Central	Central; single market foremost; accelerated-integration measures include digital and health initiatives	Peripheral: Erasmus+ and European University Alliances as people-to-people contacts; research framed as competitiveness and as a future dividend of enlargement; Horizon Europe not named
2024 Pre-enlargement Communication	Central	Central; single market foremost, with gradual-integration subsections on connectivity, climate and energy, agriculture, convergence (incl. EaSI association), security and defence	Peripheral: Erasmus+ named only as a people-to-people programme, outside the gradual-integration subsections; Horizon Europe not named; research and innovation mentioned only as a budgetary priority
2025 Communication	Central; also applied to the benefits of gradual integration	Central; “notably” the single market, extended to agriculture, trust services, space, healthcare, transport, defence and rule-of-law reporting; generic reference to programme participation	Absent from the gradual-integration section; Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ not mentioned in the main text

4.2 Research and Education: From Recognition to Displacement

2022: recognition. The 2022 Communication, which covers the Western Balkans and Türkiye, predates the dedicated architecture of gradual integration, but its framing of pre-accession integration explicitly includes the knowledge domain. It recalls the European Council’s call for gradual integration and states that much is being done to “accelerate the integration of the Western Balkans”, through “participation in EU programmes and agencies” as well as the Stabilisation and Association Agreements; among the areas of policy engagement it lists education and research and innovation, adding that the stabilisation and association process already provides for “considerable integration in advance of the date of accession” (European Commission, 2022, Section I). In its section on regional cooperation, it reports that the association of the Western Balkan partners to Horizon Europe had been finalised, that Serbia and North Macedonia were associated to Erasmus+, that the non-associated partners benefited from the programme’s international dimension funded through IPA III, and that a new enhanced partnership opened the European Universities initiative to them (European Commission, 2022, Section IV). On the classification criteria in Section 5, the first of these passages is strategically central: programme participation, including in education and research, is presented as a vehicle of accelerated integration.

2023: absence. In the 2023 Communication, the first to cover Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, research appears only in a list of high-level dialogues held with Türkiye, alongside agriculture, rural development and climate change (European Commission, 2023, Section II). Education appears only in passing - the opening of a College of Europe office in Tirana (Section II) and a regional agreement on the recognition of higher education qualifications under the Common Regional Market (Section VI) - and neither Horizon Europe nor Erasmus+ is named in the main text. Programme participation does appear in an integrative register, but outside the knowledge domain: the document notes that participating states in the Union Civil Protection Mechanism have the same rights and obligations as the Member States (European Commission, 2023, Section II).

2024: people-to-people contact and future dividend. The 2024 Communication refers to research and education in three registers, none of them the architecture of gradual integration. It presents closer cooperation and exchanges between “scientists, students and businesses” as a future benefit of enlargement for research and innovation (European Commission, 2024a, Section II); it describes the participation of the region in Erasmus+, the European Solidarity Corps and the European University Alliances as promoting people-to-people contacts; and it notes that the Western Balkans Agenda on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport continues to facilitate “development of research infrastructures”, science and technology parks and technology transfer, contributing to the region’s competitiveness (European Commission, 2024a, Section VI). Research and innovation also figure among high-level dialogues with Türkiye (Section III). Horizon Europe is not named. By contrast, the list of accelerated-integration measures in Section V includes digital initiatives such as the European Digital Innovation Hubs and WiFi4EU.

The Communication on pre-enlargement reforms follows the same pattern. Each policy area it reviews closes with a subsection headed “Gradual integration”, and these subsections refer to participation of enlargement countries in EU agencies and programmes in transport and energy, to their association to the EaSI strand, and to a possible extension of their participation in defence-industrial programmes (European Commission, 2024b, Section 2.B). No comparable subsection exists for research, innovation or education. Erasmus+ does appear: the Commission undertakes to continue supporting “people-to-people programmes, such as Erasmus+”, especially with regard to youth, in order to foster a common European spirit - but in the register of societal contact, outside the gradual-integration subsections (Section 2.B). Horizon Europe is not named; research and innovation appear only in the budget section, as one of several areas requiring common investment (Section 2.C).

2025: absence in an expanded architecture. The 2025 Communication’s gradual-integration section enumerates a broader range of areas than any earlier document, yet contains no reference to research or education (European Commission, 2025, Section III.3). The closest references lie elsewhere: people-to-people dialogue through culture, youth and sport in the section on information and public engagement (Section IV), and regional mobility agreements on the recognition of academic qualifications and access to higher education under the Western Balkans Common Regional Market (Section III.4) - both framed as public outreach or regional cooperation rather than as integration into EU structures.

The trajectory is therefore not one of constant omission but of displacement - a term used here to denote an observed change in positioning within the corpus, without implying intentional exclusion: the knowledge domain was part of the Commission’s account of accelerated integration in 2022 and dropped out of it as gradual integration was formalised and expanded. The asymmetry in the later documents is not between the presence and absence of programmes as such, but between programmes framed as vehicles of gradual integration and programmes framed as cooperation or contact. Appendix 1 sets the relevant passages side by side.

4.3 The Structural Pattern: Separation of Research and Education from the Strategic Framing

The separation is also institutional. The Commission’s web resource on promoting education and skills - which compiles the participation data cited in Section 4 - exists as a standalone resource, separated from the core enlargement documentation. Strikingly, it describes Erasmus+ as “an important initiative for the gradual integration and association of the enlargement partners to the EU policies in these fields” (European Commission, n.d.-d). The same framing appears in sectoral communication: in October 2024, DG NEAR reported that the EU and Western Balkan ministers had reaffirmed their commitment to stronger integration of the region into the European Education Area and the European Research Area (European Commission, 2024c). The integrative framing of research and education thus exists within the Commission - on its own enlargement website - but it is not carried into the Communications that set out the strategic architecture of gradual integration after 2022. The omission therefore cannot be attributed to an absence of relevant policy understanding, which makes the separation between sectoral and strategic framing the more notable.

The accession negotiations point in the same direction. The *acquis* under Chapter 25 (Science and research) does not require transposition of EU rules into national law; implementation capacity relates to the conditions for effective participation in the Framework Programmes (Directorate for EU Affairs, 2024; European Commission, n.d.-a). The chapter has typically been among the first opened and provisionally closed - in the case of Türkiye, on the same day in June 2006 (Directorate for EU Affairs, 2024). That it

presents little negotiating difficulty may contribute to its limited strategic visibility - a pattern consistent with, though not conclusive proof of, the knowledge domain being treated as technically unproblematic rather than strategically valuable.

4.4 Comparative Salience: A Hierarchy of Integration Instruments

Compared with market integration, rule-of-law conditionality and other EU programmes, the treatment of knowledge-based instruments across the corpus reveals a hierarchy that becomes sharper after 2022, summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparative salience of policy domains in the analysed EU enlargement documents, 2022-2025 (source: authors' analysis)

Policy domain	Discursive context in the corpus	Structural positioning	Linkage to gradual integration and accession incentives
Single market access	Sections on gradual integration and the Growth Plans (2023-2025)	Strategic framing	Directly linked to gradual integration
Rule-of-law conditionality	Fundamentals, benchmarks, cluster methodology; Rule of Law Report	Core accession logic	Directly linked to benchmarks and rewards; Rule of Law Report named as element of gradual integration (2025)
Other EU programmes (e.g. EaSI; Civil Protection Mechanism; transport-, energy-, digital- and defence-related programmes)	Gradual-integration subsections and lists of accelerated-integration measures (2024-2025); Civil Protection Mechanism framed in terms of equal rights and obligations (2023)	Strategic / sectoral	Named as vehicles of gradual integration or framed in integrative terms
Research cooperation (Horizon Europe)	2022: accelerated integration and regional cooperation; 2023-2025: dialogue with Türkiye, competitiveness, future dividend, budget	2022: strategic; thereafter technical / sectoral	Linked in 2022; not named in the main text after 2022
Education mobility (Erasmus+)	2022: association status and enhanced partnership; 2024: people-to-people contacts; not mentioned in 2023 or 2025	2022: strategic; thereafter peripheral / societal contact	Linked in 2022; not linked thereafter
EU studies (Jean Monnet Actions)	Not mentioned in the corpus	-	Not linked

Single market access and rule-of-law conditionality dominate the strategic language of the documents, and several non-knowledge programmes are named as vehicles of gradual integration. Research and education programmes, by contrast, move from a strategically central position in 2022 to technical, societal or peripheral positions thereafter, with little or no linkage to the incentive architecture, despite the evidence reviewed in Section 4 that they can generate sustained institutional and professional ties.

4.5 Interpretation: What the Displacement Reveals

The analysis yields a clear finding, bounded by the five-document corpus examined: EU research and education programmes are present in the enlargement landscape but, since 2023, under-recognised in the Commission's strategic framing of gradual integration - acknowledged as beneficial cooperation or people-to-people contact, not framed as integration mechanisms. The finding is sharpened by two features of the corpus. First, the knowledge domain was part of the Commission's account of accelerated integration in 2022, so its later absence reflects a change in framing rather than a blind spot. Second, as gradual integration

expanded to space, healthcare, defence, rule-of-law reporting and programme participation in general, the knowledge domain remained outside it.

The corpus does not allow the causes of this shift to be established, but several readings are plausible and not mutually exclusive. The formalisation of gradual integration around the Growth Plans from late 2023 channelled the concept into performance-based instruments centred on single market access, in which research and education - governed by separate programme rules and, in the case of Horizon Europe, by association agreements already in force - had no obvious place. The extension of the Communications to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia from 2023 may have shifted attention towards security, energy and reconstruction. And in the 2025 Communication, the regional cooperation section - where research and education had still appeared in 2022 and 2024 - concentrates on the Common Regional Market and connectivity. Whatever the cause, the result is an inconsistency between sectoral and strategic framing: the EU invests substantially in programmes through which enlargement-country institutions participate in European research and education structures - in the case of Horizon Europe on terms broadly equivalent to those of Member State entities - and its own enlargement website describes Erasmus+ as an instrument of gradual integration, yet the Communications no longer draw on this in their account of gradual integration.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications: Broadening the Conception of Gradual Integration

The findings suggest that the Commission’s strategic framing of gradual integration, as expressed in the analysed documents, captures incentive-based mechanisms more explicitly than socialisational ones. This framing treats integration as driven by elite-level cost-benefit calculations - market access and financial incentives in exchange for measurable compliance - which is, as argued in Section 3.2, an extension rather than a departure from the external incentives model. What it captures less explicitly is the socialisational dimension of European integration. Checkel’s (2005, 2007) work on international institutions and socialisation provides the complementary lens: among the mechanisms he identifies, he distinguishes strategic calculation, in which actors adapt behaviour in response to material incentives, from normative suasion, in which actors come to internalise norms through sustained interaction. Conditionality and market-focused gradual integration operate predominantly, though not exclusively, through the former. Knowledge-based instruments should not be understood as the mirror-image alternative: Horizon Europe, for instance, combines competitive funding, formal eligibility rules and contractual obligations on research management, financial administration and data governance with networked, socialisational effects, so instrumental incentives and rule adaptation coexist with socialisation rather than being displaced by it (Section 4.3). Knowledge-based integration differs from classical conditionality not because it excludes incentives or rules, but because its integrative effects are expected to be mediated primarily through repeated institutional participation, professional networks and socialisation rather than through accession-linked government compliance.

The distinction has implications for durability. Where conditionality-based integration has been undermined by state capture (Richter & Wunsch, 2020), socialisation-based integration can create constituencies at the level of institutions and professional communities; evidence from the EU’s strategic partnerships suggests that such educational networks can persist, and even strengthen, when high-level political relations stall (Ferreira-Pereira & Mourato Pinto, 2021). The theoretical contribution of this paper is therefore twofold: it suggests that the conception of gradual integration emerging from the analysed documents and the policy literature reviewed here captures its incentive-based mechanisms more fully than its socialisational ones, and it proposes that conceptualisations of gradual integration would benefit from incorporating both the strategic-calculation logic of market access and the socialisation

logic of knowledge-based participation, as overlapping rather than mutually exclusive mechanisms.

5.2 Policy Implications: The Case for Mainstreaming

The case for mainstreaming knowledge-based instruments into the enlargement framework rests on three arguments. The first is efficiency: the EU already invests substantially in programmes through which enlargement-country institutions participate in European research and education structures; recognising their integrative potential explicitly within the gradual integration agenda would increase the strategic return on existing investments without significant new resources. The second is political feasibility: research and education integration does not threaten Member State economic interests as labour market or agricultural integration might, and requires none of the complex legal arrangements that single market access entails - in the case of Horizon Europe, institutional participation is already extensive and provides an established infrastructure through which knowledge-based integration can occur; what is missing is its strategic recognition. The third is institutional durability: if, as Lavenex (2008) argues, sectoral and networked governance is a principal channel of EU influence beyond conditionality, ties embedded in administrative and professional practice may prove more resilient to changes of government than commitments that depend on the calculations of incumbents - an expectation that remains to be tested (Section 7.3).

An obvious objection must be confronted: since all enlargement countries are already associated to Horizon Europe, under association agreements rather than accession conditionality, the programme may be absent from the strategic framework precisely because it can no longer serve as leverage. The objection presupposes that the only strategic function an instrument can perform within enlargement policy is that of a conditional incentive - exactly the assumption this paper contests. The strategic value of knowledge-based instruments lies not in their capacity to be withheld but in what their operation can produce: institutional convergence, professional socialisation and lasting constituencies for integration. The 2022 Communication itself presented programme participation as a means of accelerating integration, not as a lever. Erasmus+ presents a different case: with full association limited to three enlargement countries, the phasing-in logic of the 2020 methodology retains a conventional, forward-looking application here.

Mainstreaming can accordingly be specified in operational terms. First, the annual Enlargement Package could systematically synthesise participation data - association status, project participation, mobility flows - as indicators of ongoing integration, rather than leaving them in standalone resources separated from the core documentation. Second, the sections of the Communications devoted to gradual integration could name Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, the European Research Area and the European Education Area explicitly among its components, alongside the programmes already named there - restoring the 2022 framing and carrying the programmatic dimension of the 2020 methodology through to the knowledge domain. Third, association to Erasmus+ could be extended to further enlargement countries as a phasing-in step, calibrated primarily to programme-specific legal, financial and administrative readiness, including the capacity to operate a national agency. Fourth, deeper forms of phased participation remain available short of membership, such as structured involvement of enlargement countries in ERA governance. The first two proposals would require limited additional resources and no legal redesign, since they involve reporting and framing choices within existing instruments; the third would require association agreements and financial contributions; and the fourth would require further institutional and legal assessment, as it touches on decision-making rights that are not simply a matter of strategic recognition.

5.3 Limitations and Risks

Knowledge-based integration is no panacea and no substitute for the political and rule-of-law reforms that remain the necessary condition of membership. Several caveats apply. First, there is a risk of over-instrumentalisation: if research and education programmes are reframed primarily as enlargement instruments, the merit-based participation criteria on which their integrative value rests could be compromised by political criteria. Second, if participation were converted into a formal conditionality criterion, it could face the same manipulation that has undermined classical conditionality; mainstreaming must therefore mean strategic recognition and coordination, not conditional instrumentalisation. Third, the analysis is limited to five documents: as Section 6.3 shows, research and education receive more integrative treatment in sectoral communication and on the Commission's website, and country reports may differ; the socialisational effects theorised here also call for empirical investigation - for instance, whether institutions participating intensively

in Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ show measurably different governance outcomes. Fourth, the documents change in scope and structure over the period - the 2022 Communication covers only the Western Balkans and Türkiye - so part of the observed shift may reflect changes in coverage and genre rather than deliberate reframing; the paper identifies the shift but does not establish its causes. Fifth, document analysis captures the Commission’s official framing rather than the full practice or institutional understanding of enlargement policy. Sixth, the classification rests on the authors’ joint interpretation rather than on independent double coding with a formal reliability measure.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that EU research and education programmes - notably Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, including Jean Monnet Actions - constitute an under-theorised and, in the Commission’s recent strategic framing, under-recognised instrument of gradual integration. Drawing on external governance theory (Lavenex, 2004; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009), the literature on EU research policy (Ulnicane, 2015, 2023), differentiated integration (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020) and socialisation theory (Checkel, 2005, 2007), it has argued that these programmes operate through mechanisms that combine incentive-based and socialisational logics, complementary to, yet analytically distinct from, the conditionality-based approaches dominating enlargement policy.

The document analysis identifies a shift. In 2022, the Commission presented participation in EU programmes and agencies, with education and research and innovation among the areas of engagement, as a means of accelerating the integration of the Western Balkans, and reported the completed association of the region to Horizon Europe. Between 2023 and 2025, as gradual integration was formalised around the Growth Plans and then widened to energy, customs, space, healthcare, transport, defence, rule-of-law reporting and participation in selected programmes, research and education dropped out of its enumerations: Horizon Europe, to which all ten enlargement countries are associated, is not named in the main text of the Communications after 2022, and Erasmus+ appears only as a people-to-people programme - even though the Commission’s own enlargement website describes Erasmus+ as an instrument of gradual integration. The problem is not that these programmes are underused - in Horizon Europe, participation is already extensive and legally embedded - but that their integrative potential is no longer incorporated into the strategic framing, while in Erasmus+ the phasing-in potential remains largely untapped.

At a moment when enlargement is again high on the EU’s agenda and the limitations of classical conditionality are more apparent than ever, recognising knowledge-based integration as a component of the EU’s gradual integration toolkit is both an analytical contribution and a modest policy opportunity, some elements of which could be implemented at limited additional cost. The Union already invests in these instruments, and in 2022 it already presented participation in EU programmes, including in education and research, as a means of accelerating integration; for much of what mainstreaming would require, what remains is to restore them to the policy framework that governs the current enlargement agenda.

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