

EU Enlargement Policy: A Stepping Stone to a New Security Architecture

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Shifting Perceptions

The claim that perception is everything has long been a maxim in politics. Recent events corroborate this: before Putin's fateful decision to unleash a full-scale, brutal war on Ukraine, European leaders grossly underestimated the threat that Russia posed to peace and security on the continent. Despite the US diplomatic and intelligence-sharing campaign (Harris et al., 2022), as well as plenty of historical evidence¹ on what Putin is capable of, few believed that the Russian leader would blunder into invading Ukraine. Thus, when Putin did the unthinkable on 24 February 2022 and launched his "special operation" to reclaim Ukraine by force, the EU was unprepared to uphold the rules-based international order against a country with extraordinary nuclear capability, without sparking a NATO-Russia war.

This startling turn of events quickly altered the Union's threat perception. Large majorities of the population in the Member States began to see Putin's Russia as a menace to the security of the EU (81%) and their own countries (76%) (Eurobarometer, 2023). And although European leaders still diverged in their risk assessments of the situation, they could hardly ignore the ripple effects of the war on their doorsteps. The natural order of priorities dictated that the EU act fast to support Ukraine's resistance against belligerent Russia and mitigate the ensuing, multilevel consequences of the conflict. It was not always easy, but

the Union and its allies managed to come together more decisively and swiftly than in previous crises. Their collective response – so far largely driven by events rather than a strategic outlook – helped to prevent Russia from subjugating its neighbour. Yet, hopes for the rapid liberation of Ukraine have now given way to expectations of a protracted war of attrition. Keeping a war going is neither sustainable for the West given the mounting costs, nor propitious to negotiating a durable truce for lasting peace. In the current reality – with the looming prospect of military stalemate and a global political race underway – the EU should change perspective: setting its sights on the horizon and eyeing a new security architecture. Doing so requires more than just having and being ready to use "muscle"; it also means forging long-term cooperation and compromise, both near and far. As a peace-building project at its core, which achieved success via economic integration, democracy promotion and diplomacy, the EU should draw on its strengths to find new ways in which it can render its own experience useful in today's world affairs. In this sense, the Union's existing enlargement policy becomes immensely important, because influencing the emergence of the new global order is only possible if the EU sorts its vicinity out first.

The Formidable Enlargement Project

Traditionally, enlargement has been regarded as the Union's most successful foreign policy. Bringing the central eastern European (CEE) countries into the EU's fold in the 2000s helped to stabilize Europe at the end of the Cold War. Likewise, offering the Euro-

¹ For example, Russia's earlier brutal tactics in Chechnya and Georgia, its military propping up of an authoritarian and cruel regime in Syria, its illegal seizure of Crimea or its expanding sphere of influence in Belarus and Central Asia.

pean perspective to the Balkan countries in 2003 helped the EU to bring conflict to an end in the region. Little surprise then that in June last year, the Member States also extended the prospect of membership to Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. Moral duty and posturing *vis-à-vis* Russia likely played a role. But this symbolic political nod also seems a reflex option that fits with the EU's long-standing perception that the best way to anchor stability and security on the Union's borders is to open the doors of the European family to new members. Yet, once again, the reality is far more complex and raises significant challenges both for the countries seeking to join the EU as well as for those already part of the bloc.

For the Balkan Countries

Twenty years after Thessaloniki, the enlargement promise made by the EU to the Balkans has neither materialized nor produced the intended results. Croatia is the only country from the region that managed to become a Member State, a decade ago. While peace did take hold in the Balkans, stability remains fragile, as repeated flare-ups in Serbia-Kosovo relations, recent tensions in Montenegro or the chronic constitutional crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina clearly demonstrate. The enlargement policy has not been able to resolve statehood and bilateral disputes or reconciliation issues in multi-ethnic societies, which the Balkan countries inherited from the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The successor states of the Soviet Union in eastern Europe occupied by Russia face similar challenges. Enlargement policy has also struggled to transform the countries of the region into consolidated democracies. Enduring autocratic leaders throughout the Balkans² are not much interested in promoting good governance and good neighbourly relations, when doing so can undermine their own power position. Ethnopolitics has bred state contestation, state capture and corruption, and has sabotaged democratic reform in the region. In recent indices measuring impunity, like the rule of law, human rights protection and government accountability, the Balkans fare worse than much of the rest of the continent (Eurasia Group..., 2023). Even front-running candidates,

like Serbia, have been rolling back on previous democratic achievements and cultivating fraternal ties with Putin, including by their continued refusal to shore up the EU's sanctions regime against Russia. Moreover, prosperity and opportunity remain a distant hope for the Balkans. So far, the EU's reform prescriptions have not managed to turn the tide and the war has increased the risk of economic downturn. Given the region's dependency on exports to and financial flows from the EU, economic troubles in the Union reverberate in the Balkans (Bechev, 2023). Potential economic slowdown or stagnation in the region invites assistance from actors like China, Türkiye or the Gulf states, whose presence in the Balkans has grown over the years through investments, such as in critical infrastructure, but also in political and cultural ties and the spread of disinformation. Unlike the EU, none of these actors bother with reform asks.

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Thus, the situation on the ground in the Balkan countries does not exactly help the case for enlargement. The region's thin record sheet and the EU's lack of ready-made or effective solutions encourages the Member States to "go slow" or "wait" on the dossier. It also feeds a complacent assumption on the part of the EU that "the *status quo* is manageable and poses no serious risk to European security" (Taylor, 2022). Until when, though?

For the Associated Trio

Similarly difficult questions arise around the technical and political terms the new membership offers. Symbolically, it seems unlikely that the Republic of Moldova or Georgia – although small and not (yet) at war

² See, for example, Kmezić and Florian, 2017.

with Russia – would be allowed to enter the EU before Ukraine. If so, the reality is that it will take a long time for a still warring Ukraine to be able to complete an accession process that has become more complex and rigorous than in any previous enlargement rounds. Fulfilling conditions while fighting a war is already a tall order. But even if peace were to soon be restored, the country would have to juggle costly EU reforms with post-war reconstruction and possibly state-building. The Balkans faced a comparable triple transition, which they are still yet to complete.

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Especially when it comes to fulfilling the EU's democratic conditionality, the homework is sizeable for the trio, as detailed also in last year's European Commission's Opinions. Bottom-up pressure seems robust considering that civil society³ closely monitors the pace of change (or lack thereof) in the different contexts; that 73% of Ukrainians support EU reform conditions for the opening of accession talks (New Europe Centre, 2023a); and that thousands of Georgians took to the streets last month, when their government tried to pass a bill that could threaten their country's Euro-Atlantic integration prospects (Sauer, 2023). But one cautionary tale from the Balkans is that making progress on anti-corruption and judicial reforms or de-oligarchization – among many other thorny issues confronting all eastern aspirants – is going to be neither linear nor fast.

This makes managing public expectations an important task. For now, Ukrainians perceive candidacy as a powerful tool for domestic transformation (Haran and Burkovskyi, 2022), and many believe that their country will become a Member State within a decade (70%) (Statista, 2022). But the Balkans show that time can sour public opinion. The snail pace of enlargement and reforms has gradually fuelled lukewarm support for EU accession in the region (Sinisa,

2023) (Dartford, 2022). The longer it takes for Ukraine and the other EU-hopeful countries to advance towards or enter the Union, the higher the risk of public frustration with European integration.

To facilitate the process, it might be sensible to expect that the EU will adapt (i.e. dilute) the membership conditionality for Ukraine. In that case, why would the bar continue to be held high for the Balkan countries? Will it also be lowered for the Republic of Moldova and Georgia? How will the EU save face if it introduces a “fast track” for all or some countries after decades of insisting on a “strict and fair” process? The Balkans' enlargement is intrinsically linked to that of the trio and should be discussed and handled jointly. The Balkan countries also have 20 years of experience to draw on and can help the new eastern aspirants navigate the complexities of the enlargement process. And the CEE countries that have recently graduated to accession could assist too. The question of *how* to complete enlargement can only be answered by working together.

For the European Union

Finally, the uncertain fate of the enlargement policy is also down to the Member States. In time, EU capitals have become more preoccupied with internal problems (e.g. the eurozone crisis in the early to mid-2010s, the refugee wave in 2015-2016, the coronavirus pandemic since 2019) and increasingly more fickle and stricter on enlargement. Their haphazard commitment has repeatedly put spanners in the works, delaying or stopping the process.

And they will not catch a break now. Although the Union might dodge recession this year, its economy remains vulnerable to the evolution of the war (Zalan, 2023). Ongoing concerns about inflation, energy supplies, the rising cost of living, security, irregular migration, health or climate change stand to fuel the kind of deep-seated public anxiety on which populists prey. Such risks could get bigger as the 2024 elections to the European Parliament draw nearer. Hence, it is not only that the EU might turn its attention inwards and away from enlargement, but also Member States too could shift their focus away from Brussels and towards domestic issues.

³ E.g. New Europe Centre, 2023b.

The historic decision to offer the European perspective to the eastern countries could further lose traction in view of the continued problems with democracy that the EU is unable to resolve in existing members (e.g. Hungary and Poland), which warns against the risk of importing more of the same if current aspirants join. Likewise, since the EU is already saddled with one frozen conflict (Cyprus), the prospect of importing similar unresolved territorial disputes from the trio and the Balkans, can be disheartening.

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In addition, the EU's geopolitical gesture came at a time when internal politics challenges the ability of the Union to contemplate further broadening in its current form. As noted last June by the German Chancellor Scholz, "We must make the European Union capable of enlargement. This requires institutional reform." (Noyan, 2022) In part, this is because a Union of 30+ members raises legitimate questions of governability. Especially since Ukraine's population is over 43 million, compared to the 15 million of all six Balkan countries. Ensuing dilemmas about the impact of additional members on voting rights, the efficiency of decision-making or the EU budget thereby gain salience and could stymie the prospect of a new enlargement round.

At present, Member States' appetite for changes to the EU's policies and governance structures is rather scant, especially when the issue of treaty reform comes up (Euractiv, 2022). This attitude discounts the timely opportunity offered by public opinion, which is still overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Ukrainian cause and broadly in favour of strengthening the EU (DG COMM, 2023). Growing economic anxiety as the war drags out could later dampen these sentiments. But the Member States' lack of ambition to prepare the EU for the new era and deal at last with the Union's absorption capacity problem also sug-

gests that the membership offer – albeit well-meaning – is not embedded in a credible vision for the future of the EU's engagement with neighbours.

Shaping Reality

How will the EU be able to retain its geostrategic relevance with still so many grey zones in its courtyard? Pretending that enlargement policy works, that the situation in the neighbourhood is wieldy, and that its role as a global actor can be performed without internal structural change ignores reality. Following through on its commitments to the eastern countries AND the Balkans is an integral and indispensable part of any credible EU plan for a new security and defence architecture. The Member States should get serious about enlargement policy and take whatever decisive steps are necessary for it to deliver transformation and unity. Repeated technical tweaks to the enlargement methodology might help but they will never suffice to complete the European Union without strong political resolve, an unshakable vision of a joint future and a lot more generous support from the EU. And that political will cannot emerge without an ambitious reform process internally.

Since "foreign policy begins at home" (Haas, 2013), putting its own house in order could lend credibility to the EU's global community building plans and be more likely to inspire meaningful political coordination across Europe, such as via the European Political Community initiative. Perhaps these far-reaching changes will include the reform of EU decision-making and the creation of a democratic *acquis*. In that case, a geopolitically-minded Union could welcome new members quicker and maintain democratic leverage post-accession. Without its own members able to transgress on democratic standards at will, critics will no longer have arguments to oppose expansion or accuse the EU of double standards. Practising the

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cooperation and reform principles that it preaches abroad, the Union can prove its geopolitical acumen. Perception is not yet reality, but the EU can still shape reality to fit its perspective.

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