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From the Western Balkans to Ukraine and beyond: Rethinking EU Enlargement Policy

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Almost three decades after it was designed to integrate Central and Eastern European countries, the enlargement policy of the European Union (EU) is at a crossroads. There is ample evidence that the policy as it stands is not working, and yet, as a consequence of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, calls for accession are getting both stronger and more pressing. Over the past few decades, accession to the EU has turned into a convoluted process, the outcome of which has become increasingly uncertain. The path followed by the Western Balkans to the EU has been meandering and bumpy, not least because of these countries' own shortcomings in implementing key political reforms and the rise of authoritarianism in the region, but also because the whole accession process has become hostage to national interests or bilateral disputes triggered by EU member states, which have gained increasing control over the process. This was vividly illustrated by the successive vetoes by Greece, France and Bulgaria to the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia. Twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, EU membership is not yet in sight for the countries of the Western Balkans. This is despite the fact that the EU opened accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia (in addition to Serbia and Montenegro) and granted Bosnia and Herzegovina EU candidate status in 2022. In essence, the timeline for accession remains unpredictable.

At the same time, calls for accession from countries that were not recognised as candidates have not only grown stronger, but have also become more urgent in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The European Council's decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova EU candidate status (as well as the recognition of Georgia as a potential candidate country) in June 2022 constitutes a major turning point. This is because it charts a completely new course for these eastern neighbours, whose relations with the EU had hitherto been constrained by the sheer uncertainty over their *finalité*. And yet, notwithstanding such crucial clarifications, accession to the EU remains fraught with unpredictability. In fact, for all its symbolic value, the status of EU candidate does not suffice *per se* to instil credibility and certainty into the accession process as EU member states hold different views on when and how to enlarge, and perhaps also on which countries should join the EU first.

Within the EU, there is a broad consensus on the fact that the current enlargement policy is no longer fit for purpose, and yet there is no agreement on the next steps: how fast should the EU proceed with future rounds of enlargement? How should the next waves of accession be sequenced? And crucially, how should enlargement policy be reformed? Considering its past shortcomings and the current challenges that it faces, enlargement policy needs to be fully revamped.

An outcome-oriented process and a clear timeline for accession

In order to regain credibility among candidate countries, the EU needs to **make enlargement policy outcome-oriented and set concrete deadlines throughout the process.**

The current enlargement policy is premised on a process-oriented approach in which the path to membership prevails over the outcome. Since the 1990s, candidate countries have had to fully comply with the accession criteria (the so-called Copenhagen criteria) before joining the EU. However, this approach has exhibited major shortcomings, not least because of EU member states' leverage in assessing candidate countries' readiness for membership. Both the definition of benchmarks for opening and closing negotiating chapters and the evaluation of their fulfilment are subject to unanimity within the Council. As was blatantly exposed in the Western Balkans, the possibility of vetoing negotiations has repeatedly been invoked in order to safeguard or promote national interests. This, in turn, has severely damaged the EU's credibility as the *finalité* of the process – EU membership – has been overshadowed by a number of pitfalls on the path to accession. In fact, the lack of a clear timeline – combined with the option for EU member states to block the process at key moments – has paved the way for other international actors (not least Russia and China, but also Turkey) to gain influence in the region.

In order to regain credibility among candidate countries, the EU needs to make enlargement policy outcome-oriented, in other words focused on membership. This entails setting concrete deadlines throughout the process. Deadlines not only carry symbolic value for the candidate countries and their citizens, but they also enable the EU to put pressure on local elites to reform. While setting a timeline may trigger false expectations, this risk can be mitigated by combining deadlines with a progressive accession process. In such a framework, deadlines would thus be intermediate markers, which also means that candidate countries would not progress to the following stage if reforms are insufficient.

A merit-based process

The pace and the sequencing of enlargement should not be pre-determined. This should **only result from candidate countries' progress in meeting the criteria set** at each stage of the process.

Russia's war in Ukraine has drastically changed the geopolitics of enlargement as it has led the EU to extend its membership offer to countries for which such prospects were not on the table, namely Eastern Partnership-associated countries. However, this new reality has triggered unprecedented debates on the sequencing of the upcoming enlargement rounds. Anchoring Ukraine, Moldova and potentially Georgia on the accession track alongside Western Balkans countries raises the question of who should join the EU first. Twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit, should the Western Balkans gain access first? Should geopolitical considerations prevail and give precedence to Ukraine and Moldova? Or should they all join at the same time?

Joint accession is neither likely nor desirable given the massive discrepancies between the candidate countries, which call for the enlargement process to be tailored to their specific situations. Instead, the pace of accession should only result from candidate countries' progress in meeting the criteria set at each stage of the process.

The regatta approach – whereby each candidate country progresses on the path to membership in line with its reform efforts – proved its worth in the late 1990s, when countries such as Slovakia, Latvia and Lithuania were able to catch up on reforms within the space of only a few years, joining the EU together with Poland, the Czech Republic and Estonia. In this approach, neither the pace nor the sequencing of accession is predetermined. Instead, they result from candidate countries' compliance with accession criteria. At the same time, the regatta principle can turn the accession process into a fierce competition plagued by national interests, which bears a significant risk especially for the Western Balkans. In fact, the regatta approach may also lead to yet another impasse in EU enlargement, should any new EU member state invoke their right of veto against candidate countries. However, this risk can be mitigated by combining this approach with a reform of EU governance.

A staged accession process premised on fundamental issues

The EU should change the whole logic underpinning accession. Currently, it requires candidate countries “to be like us before they can join”, including through full ex ante compliance with the *acquis* (the cumulative body of EU legal acts). This should give way to a more gradual approach, i.e. “become like us through joining”. Enlargement policy should therefore be premised on **staged integration**, based on transparent criteria, with three key elements: gradual **socialisation** (with EU institutions in particular), access to **funding** (structural funds), and (in order to avoid subsequent backsliding) **reversibility** of the process.

The approach underpinning current EU enlargement policy is based on two major tenets. First, it is premised on a binary vision, according to which countries are either in or out of the EU. In this vein, candidate countries remain outsiders until the day their accession treaty is ratified. This has massive political and economic implications, as participation in EU institutions as well as access to EU funding (especially as part of the structural funds) come all of a sudden together with membership. Second, it reflects a technocratic vision of enlargement. Since the 1990s, compliance with the *acquis* has *de facto* prevailed over other accession criteria, thereby resulting in a discrepancy with the political nature of the EU’s integration process.

Delays and deadlocks in the Western Balkans’ accession process, which derive from these two tenets, have exposed the need for a comprehensive overhaul of enlargement policy, going beyond the 2020 revision. In recent years, staged integration has increasingly emerged as a model capable of reinvigorating the EU’s enlargement policy. It should be based on transparent and well-operationalised criteria and offer key benefits for applicants once the criteria are met, including:

- Progressive participation in EU institutions, first as observers, then as fully-fledged participants. This would also help newcomers to become familiarised with the EU;

- Progressive access to structural funds. This would help to strengthen candidate countries’ administrative capacities and their ability to effectively function as member states.

Crucially, throughout the accession process, the EU should **prioritise fundamental issues** (i.e. deep reforms to guarantee the rule of law and strong democratic institutions) over compliance with the nitty-gritty of the *acquis*. This is especially critical given the flaws observed in the candidate countries.

Conclusions and recommendations

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, enlargement policy has become a prominent issue on the EU’s agenda. The geopolitical and security context has been instrumental in pushing both France and Germany (which were initially reluctant to engage in further EU enlargement) towards a more supportive stance, as was illustrated by [President Macron’s speech in Bratislava in June 2023](#). However, both French and German leaders have also drawn a link between enlargement and EU governance reforms. This is because the EU also needs to prepare itself for future accessions. Governance reforms should be conducted prior to enlargement in order to avoid new rivalries and stalemates. Such reforms are not only crucial to ensure that the enlargement process can no longer be hijacked by national interests, but are also critical to ensure the smooth functioning of an EU with 36 member states.

In the short term, the EU needs leadership from a group of member states in order to steer the forthcoming enlargement process. Such a coalition of the willing could start with the Weimar Triangle (France, Germany and Poland) and be extended to other countries, such as the Czech Republic and Slovenia. It is indeed important to include not only founding members, but also countries that have gone through the EU’s accession process and can share their experience with newcomers. Crucially, this group should also comprise countries seeking to join the EU in order to create an interactive format, thereby dropping the “master-to-pupil” model of enlargement.

In the medium term, the EU should introduce new veto rules in order to avoid fresh stalemates in the enlargement process. This is undoubtedly a sensitive issue that requires careful trade-offs between sovereignty and effectiveness. A solution could be to change veto rules by increasing the number of member states required for a veto.

In the long term, socialisation (which can be understood as the process of familiarisation with EU norms) is a powerful mechanism for making enlargement a success. It should be used as part of the accession process and also in other formats (e.g. the European Political Community). Crucially, it should target both the elites and the general public, whether in the EU or in candidate countries. This is critical for a smooth integration of the new member states, not least because the ratification of accession treaties is likely to take place via referendums in some EU member states (including France), but also because of the dearth of knowledge on candidate countries among the EU general public.

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