A Year Later:
War in Ukraine and
Western Balkan (Geo)Politics

Editors

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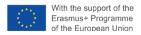Soeren Keil

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Broken Promises Diplomacy: The Russia-Ukraine War and the End of Enlargement as We Know It

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Among its many other tragic effects, the Russia-Ukraine war has complicated life for the countries of the Western Balkans. The European Union's reaction to the war included the revival of a rhetoric supportive of enlargement to the Western Balkans, in addition to financial aid to weather the energy crisis. The European Council has even granted candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which opens possibilities for that country to receive additional support. But the EU stopped short of filling that conversation with political or technical content that takes into account the years of "broken promises diplomacy" that led to the loss of credibility in the enlargement process. Instead of reconsidering what enlargement means in this context, both the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans ended up reengaging in the same kind of slow-burning formal accession negotiations they conducted in the past, expecting a different result. This absence of adaptability is likely to cause more damage than good to a region that is already struggling to fight off anti-European and anti-democratic forces from inside and out.

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Observing how the EU is using enlargement as part of its wartime policy kit redefines how we should understand the main goal it associates with this process. The 2022 EU's re-activation of enlargement reconfirms its main utility as a border stabilisation and peacebuilding mechanism (Anghel & Džankić 2023). Ascribing security goals to the process of enlargement changes its original design as an obstacle course towards full EU membership. In so doing, it makes the perspective of EU membership less sincere, despite the EU's enlargement rhetoric being built around credibility.

Once we accept security goals as the main priority of the enlargement process, an important question follows: is extending actual membership to the countries of the Western Balkans necessary to achieve these goals? Whichever the answer to that question, the EU needs to go through important structural transformations and relinquish its own damaging populist rhetoric. A realistic pathway for EU-Western Balkans relations requires the development of tailor-made relationships with candidate countries that would not subsume all progress to the idea of member status. Otherwise, any progress reported by candidate states would end up in frustration.

In this short essay, we present that line of argument in a three-stage progression. First, we show that while most EU leaders have proven a firm commitment to democracy promotion against the rise of imperialist authoritarianism in Russia (Snyder 2022) and recommitted to giving a more credible perspective of EU membership to the countries of the Western Balkans (European Council 2022), the European Union as a whole is still considering how best to adapt its institutions to the long term economic and security threat created by the war. This indecision raises questions about the EU's resilience (Anghel & Jones 2022) and its capacity-building (Genschel 2022). Second, we suggest that this absence of substantive adaptation follows a familiar failing-forward logic that is risky and may eventually prove unsustainable (Jones, Kelemen, & Meunier 2016). Finally, we suggest that a policy of realistic phasing-in for the countries of the Western Balkans would bridge the EU's current double-minded approach. In so doing, the EU would continue its process of adaptation and resilience building and increase its chances to meet its security goals.

No enlargement at all costs

EU membership has not always been a reward for good behaviour. In the case of the 2004/2007/2013 Eastern enlargement, the EU has expanded to include democratising states despite the many ways in which these diverged from core EU principles (Anghel & Jones 2021). European Union leaders considered the risks associated with this decision acceptable. To accommodate those consequences deriving from the 2004/2007/2013 enlargement, the EU has also shown that it has the ability to adapt. Not least, it showed a willingness to maintain a fragile democratic equilibrium by not triggering important punitive mechanisms against countries that challenged core EU principles (Kelemen 2020; 2022). In both situations, EU decision-makers decided that the costs associated with enlargement (and later to maintaining unity) are worth paying.

To be given EU membership, the Western Balkans would need the EU to adopt a strategy of enlargement at all costs. The difference is that this time round, the EU is convinced that those costs would be too high: for the EU, for Member States, and for the local authorities in candidate states charged with capacity building. This becomes evident once we review some of the alternative options laid out by EU Member States such as the French initiative for a European Political Community (EPC) or the 2022 Austrian non-paper on gradual integration. Enlargement, understood in traditional terms, does not rank highly on a unified EU policy agenda. However, the security of its borders does. This dilemma is now a constitutive part of the EU's core security and defence strategies. It is also the source of much confusion in its strategy towards aspiring members.

The EU has acknowledged its credibility problem in several documents, from its 2018 enlargement strategy towards the Western Balkans, to its 2020 "new enlargement methodology", to the latest EU-Western Balkans Summit that took place in Tirana in 2022. In 2018, the EU considered the prospect of the region's accession to be 'in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest. It is a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong, and united Europe based on common values'. In the same document, EU enlargement is further described as 'an investment in the EU's security, economic growth and influence and in its ability to protect its citizens' (European Commission 2018). Security needs drive the EU to become a geopolitical actor. Such documents show that having the Western Balkans "in" would strengthen the EU's security.

Not all EU documents share the same vision. In the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the Western Balkans are defined as outside partners, with whom tailored partnerships should be developed, alongside 'our eastern and southern neighbourhood, Africa, Asia and Latin America' (Diplomatic Service of the European Union 2022). Can the EU simultaneously build a security strategy around having the Western Balkans in and having them out? While the EU could end up deciding that extending actual membership may not be necessary to achieve its security goals, improving its standing in the Western Balkans and increasing its political and economic ties with the countries of the region is. The current strategic confusion is not likely to help define meaningful relationships.

The evolution of the EU through enlargement

The study of European Union enlargement typically focuses on the success or failure of candidate countries to adapt to the challenge of membership. What is less understood is how the European Union – meaning the institutions, policies, and the underlying notion of membership – changed through the enlargement process as well. The EU is hardly a fixed actor in the context of enlargement. Politically, economically, and institutionally, the EU today is different from the Union that managed the Eastern enlargement process in 2004/2007/2013. That Union, in turn, was different from the one that concluded negotiations with Austria, Sweden and Finland in 1994.

This difference might sound trivial, but the implications of thinking of the EU in these terms are not. Resistance to change is high when European Union leaders are faced with the prospect of enlargement, even if continuous change is something the EU has always done. Each time the European Union expanded, its institutions, policies, and membership evolved – both in formal terms, and more informally in terms of how the Member States, new and old, perceived their roles, rights, and obligations. This evolution has had profound consequences for the stability of the organisation that are not captured by the most prominent theories of European integration – neofunctionalist, intergovernmentalist, and post-functionalist. Tracing the evolution of the EU through the lens of the enlargement process is important not only for identifying the hidden fragility of the European Union, but also for highlighting the dynamics that have weakened many of the pillars of the international economic system from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), to

the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the G20, and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Consider some of the effects of the EU's 2004/2007/2013 enlargement. That decision was crucial to reshaping the EU. The accession of eleven new post-communist members, accompanied by Cyprus and Malta, increased fractionalisation within the institutions of the Union, the complexity of internal decision-making, tested the EU's governance mechanisms, required greater economic creativity and solidarity, and stressed the EU's commitment to core principles. It also complicated the relations between the EU and some of its closest neighbours, Russia and Turkey foremost.

These added layers of complexity define the EU's ambiguous approach to candidate states and its own geopolitical role. Once more, the EU seems to follow a failing-forward pattern in which it only half-heartedly commits to necessary internal reforms, if any. Under the pressure of the Russia-Ukraine war, it activated the same instruments of pre-accession conditionality it has used in the past, expecting different results. The main difference is in the speed with which it reacted initially, only to then reduce activity to its more usual slow-burning style of decision-making. This pattern contrasts sharply with the European Union's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, where Member States showed a greater willingness to cross previous red lines through the creation of the recovery and resilience facility embedded in Next Generation EU (Anghel & Jones 2022).

Five months after Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, the EU opened accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, eight and 17 years, respectively, since the moment when the two Western Balkan states were granted candidate status. These decisions were taken after the Western Balkan countries themselves voiced their frustration over the fact that war torn Ukraine and military threatened Moldova had been granted the status of EU candidate countries before they were, only three weeks after the 24 February 2022 invasion. So too was the decision to give candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina. How long it will take for that decision to translate into meaningful accession talks remains to be seen. Momentum may continue to build. But in the meantime, the symbolic commitment of the European Council is more prominent than any practical advantages of the decisions that have been taken.

At best, this overreliance on the beneficial effects of the process of enlargement shows the EU's confidence in its own strengths as a block. Certainly, that was true in June 1999, when the European Council instructed the European

Commission to come up with a formula to make the prospect of membership "real" for all candidate countries from Central and Easter Europe. It was also the case in 2002 when the European Council finally agreed to the big-bang enlargement (Anghel & Jones 2021). But this time around it is more likely that the joint offering of a European perspective to aspiring members who are at different stages of peace-building says much more about the institutional limitations of the EU. Those limitations are in no small measure also the result of incompletely adapting to previous rounds of enlargement.

Phasing-in

EU policy-makers know that the offer for full membership is not something that can be achieved in the near term. Unless policy-makers design a meaningful way to reward progress, they will fall into the same patterns of inaction that previously characterised their relationship with candidate states. Only providing money is not enough, as years of already provided (insufficient) aid to Moldova, Ukraine or the Western Balkans have shown. It can look too much like charity, a transactional approach that does not bring the citizens of these countries closer to the EU's core principles.

Candidate countries need to be involved in EU decision-making already through their accession negotiations. This is the phasing-in approach, a term borrowed from developmental studies that suggests that the functionalities of a new system are introduced in a particular sequence, replacing old systems and methodologies only gradually.

This new "phasing-in" approach to candidate countries should include the prospect of their participation in shaping EU legislation. In this alternative world, a country like North Macedonia would not need to get over the last hurdles of full membership to participate in EU decision-making in all other "provisionally closed" chapters. Having the candidate countries already involved in restructuring different policy areas in the EU before an uncertain inclusion with full voting rights would regain some of the credibility this process lost.

A dense involvement of candidate countries in the process of accession is unavoidable for the EU to achieve its security goals. But accession is not necessarily a goal, it is a process – not just for the candidate countries but for the EU as well. The form of what "being in" looks like has continuously changed. What remains constant is that in security terms, the Western Balkan states have to be on the inside for the EU to meet its goals.

Conclusion

The EU will not pursue a strategy of enlargement at all costs. EU policy-makers consider those costs would be too high. However well intentioned, an ideological commitment to the process of EU enlargement as an obstacle course towards full membership obscures the limitations of this process. At best the EU is using enlargement as a peace and stability building mechanism.

The EU is unlikely to extend full membership to states that fall short of anything less than an ideal of political and economic stability and who cannot show the credentials of a near perfect democracy and stable economy. Norway, Switzerland, Iceland would be welcomed, the countries of the Western Balkans not so much. This is not to deny the pressing nature of the security imperative or to suggest that the candidate countries themselves cannot change. Rather, the point is that the impact of another large-scale enlargement on the European Union itself is too costly for the European Council easily to embrace. Absent the credibility of membership as an end goal, this is not a sustainable equilibrium. The costs of a phasing-in approach of candidate states are worth considering.

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