

EU enlargement policy: autumnal winds of change ahead?

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The Western Balkans and the EU in 2022: what lies ahead?

Writing about EU enlargement to the Balkans has become depressing and repetitive. Twenty years of European integration have brought neither the promised convergence between the countries of the region and the member states, nor EU membership to the former. Instead, the accession path has become increasingly arduous for the aspirant countries in the Balkans and the destination – i.e. EU entry – ever more intangible, including for the frontrunning candidates. Moreover, the same thorny issues of statehood and democratic governance in the region and haphazard commitment to enlargement in the EU capitals keep challenging the credibility and transformative leverage of the policy.

The war in Ukraine has recently helped to raise the profile of the dossier by fostering a sense of urgency to rethink the Union's engagement with its vicinity. But ensuing discussions mix up ideas about creating a European (geo)political community of like-minded allies to better confront the new security reality with proposals to re-energise the process of further EU widening. Enlargement is nevertheless a self-standing issue that should be treated as such. It might benefit from a rejig but no amount of reform will ultimately substitute for member states' lack of political will to open the door to new members and prepare the Union's absorption capacity to that end.

So far, there is little indication that EU countries will fall into line – they all must do so given that unanimity is still required for any steps forward on enlargement. Then again, maybe – just maybe – the winds of change will start blowing this autumn with the Commission's second State of the Union address in September and the Prague Summit in October.

The fickle gatekeepers

In July this year, the Council finally launched accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The two countries had received the go-ahead for the start of membership talks already in 2020 but Bulgaria had subsequently vetoed the adoption of the Negotiation Framework for North Macedonia over issues of history and language. Since the EU treats the duo applicants as a 'package', both Skopje and Tirana were held up on their accession tracks for the past years by North Macedonia's dispute with Bulgaria.

The decision to allow the two countries to advance on a still lengthy road towards EU membership is important and long overdue. However, it comes after **Skopje agreed to compromise** based on a controversial French proposal designed to persuade Bulgaria to unblock North Macedonia's accession path. The protocol requires North Macedonia to change its Constitution to recognise a Bulgarian minority and introduce measures that protect minority rights and ban alleged hate speech. Under the same proposal, Bulgaria maintains its prerogative not to recognise the Macedonian language and demands Skopje to reflect good neighbourly relations throughout the negotiations.

The Macedonian lawmakers approved the conditions in the French-brokered deal by a slim margin, without the support of the opposition. The Parliament's endorsement also went ahead against **violent protests** and much criticism that the inclusion of bilateral issues in the accession talks was setting a dangerous precedent. Such widespread disapproval makes for a "**sad celebration**" and suggests that the agreement might not prove a lasting solution. For one, it does not prevent Bulgaria from blocking again the process in the future. But even without a new Bulgarian veto, North Macedonia will first have to amend its Constitution before the actual opening of the first negotiating chapters.

To this end, it is unclear how the parliament will manage to muster the required two-thirds majority or whether **a potential referendum** will help to bridge divisions over this matter in the country. **Anti-EU, extreme-right wing and pro-Russian elements in North Macedonia have been strengthened** because of this episode and might see a surge in electoral support at the next elections. If Putin's intention was to 'divide and conquer' in order to trip up the EU in the Balkans, recent developments seem to play right into Russia's hands.

Therefore, the risk that North Macedonia has merely moved from having a foot in the accession door to running in circles on the accession track is looming in the agreement. This prospect puts a damper on the achievement, especially given the country's long history of finding itself in limbo. Together with Albania, North Macedonia was previously blocked in 2019 by France and the Netherlands until a new methodology for accession negotiations was adopted (again) based on French proposals. Prior to that, an acrimonious dispute with Greece had obstructed its progress for a decade until the country changed its name from Macedonia to overcome Athens' veto. All in all, the start of accession talks for North Macedonia has been in the making for a staggering 17 years. Any further delays – including after all the significant concessions that the country has already accepted – are almost guaranteed to have all around negative implications.

The problem is not so much that the enlargement process is slow; effective transformation can take time. The main issue is rather that agreed standards and procedures on enlargement are increasingly disregarded by the member states on account of considerations linked to their own domestic politics. The frequency of incursions and opportunities for EU capitals to interfere and derail the process, often overruling the Commission's opinion, has increased over the years. By now, the constant fickleness of

EU capitals on enlargement is well-documented¹ and tends to put a spanner in the works, even when set conditions have been met by aspirant countries. It is also currently precluding agreement on granting the long-overdue visa liberalisation to Kosovo.

Such dynamics mask the lack of credible vision for the Union's engagement with its allies in the Balkans. Why else would the EU fail to consolidate its political space by leaving out the Balkan neighbours from the recent Conference on the Future of Europe?² They also breed frustration in the region³ and push the Balkan countries to look for pragmatic alternatives in regional coalitions and with other powers. Little surprise then that candidate countries like Serbia make no secret of their friendship with Putin and **refuse** to align with EU sanctions against Russia.

The sticky problems

But while the member states' assertive approach to the dossier undermines the transformative leverage of the policy, the Commission's ever-expanding and refined box of enlargement tools and tricks has also proven its limits. As its own assessments indicate, for all its technical benchmarks and complex conditions, the Commission is still short on answers on how to consolidate democracy, resolve statehood and bilateral issues, create functioning market economies, and reconcile war-torn, multi-ethnic societies in the Balkans.⁴ The more these thorny issues rise in importance and start conditioning progress in the overall enlargement process, the more the shortage of answers becomes obvious. It also does not help when the commissioner in charge of enlargement is accused of playing down democratic criteria for certain forerunning countries in the Balkans.⁵

Clearly, reform is not just a matter of EU prescription. It also relies on political will and implementation in the Balkans – which is hardly a given in most countries. How to engage with autocratically minded leaders in the region, who have little interest in promoting good governance and good neighbourly relations, is a real dilemma. In the end, meeting the membership conditions remains the responsibility of the Balkan countries. However, commitment to a technical process – as strict and rigorous as it may be – 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.

As cliché as it might sound, the EU should begin to walk its big talk about the strategic importance of enlargement.⁶ Doing so matters not only for the successful completion of the ongoing policy towards the Balkans. It is also important if the European perspective extended this June to Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia is to carry real – not just symbolic – value. Kiev and Chişinău received candidate status at a time when the state of affairs with regards to the Balkans casts doubt over the member states' commitment to expand the 'club'. It also came at a moment when **EU internal politics** call into question the ability of the Union to contemplate further widening in its current form, even if it was serious about enlargement. In the absence of a clear strategy, underpinned by real political commitment and a workable model, promising the prospect of EU membership only seems to be a reflex option and it could backfire.

1 E.g. Balfour, Rosa and Corina Stratulat (2015), "EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

2 Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Corina Stratulat (2021), "The Conference on the Future of Europe: Mind the gaps!", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

3 E.g. Jakov Marusic, Sinisa, "North Macedonia's Faith in EU Influence Plummeting, Survey Shows", Balkan Insight, 25 February 2022.

4 E.g. European Commission, A more credible, dynamic, predictable and political EU accession process – Commission lays out its proposals, 05 February 2020b.

5 Wanat, Zosia and Lili Bayer, "Olivér Várhelyi: Europe's under-fire gatekeeper", POLITICO, 05 October 2021.

6 Stratulat, Corina (2021), "EU enlargement towards the Balkans – Three observations", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

Fresh thinking?

Thus, the firm response that the EU was compelled to give to the trio of new applicants in the current geopolitical context has reinforced a long-standing need to re-evaluate and revitalise enlargement policy, more generally. Various reform proposals are competing for attention at present, including creating a system of EU accession in stages or a European (geo)political community.⁷

Fresh thinking is welcome. However, revising – again – the enlargement method cannot substitute for the member states' lack of political will to welcome new entrants. The process would just keep dragging on counterproductively. If enlargement needs overhaul is with respect to member states' political will to enlarge but also the ability of the process to offer solutions to sticky issues like the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, the impasse in Bosnia-Herzegovina or the persistence of autocratic leaders in the region. That's where the focus of any potential upgrades should lie and [recent tensions in Northern Kosovo](#) are a strong reminder in this regard.

Beyond that, the merits of the 2020 'new approach' have not even been properly tested out, given the delays in commencing negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. The strengths and weaknesses of this reform to the Union's tools and methods will become obvious now that/if the accession process of the two candidates gets properly underway. Further updates should be introduced only if the implementation of the 'new approach' reveals that fixes are needed. At any rate, [Charles Michel's proposal for a geopolitical community](#) chimes with the revised methodology when it refers, for example, to gradual phasing-in of aspiring countries to individual EU policies, markets, and programmes before they join. Thus, the new methodology should be first tried out rather than automatically tempered with.

As for Macron's idea of a political community, its lack of details has [raised suspicion](#) that it might masquerade as an alternative to EU membership. The June Council did not help to provide any more clarity on its purpose, although it did [conclude](#) that "such a framework will not replace existing EU policies and instruments, notably enlargement". Ultimately, if this proposal is not to be dismissed as a second-class ticket to EU accession, the discussion about rethinking the Union's relationship with the wider European continent in the context of war should be kept separate from that on enlargement reform.⁸ Both discussions should also spell out all the specifics in each case. The Prague Summit, planned in early October by the current Czech Presidency of the EU Council, is meant to convene the leaders of the member states and third European countries interested in this political community. In that sense, the event could prove an opportunity to lift the fog on the idea and assess its actual merits.

The absorption capacity 'elephant'

In addition, before the Union tries to reinvent the enlargement wheel, it should prepare its absorption capacity to ensure that any new accessions will continue to go hand in hand with a further 'deepening' of integration. As the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz noted in a [speech](#) to the Bundestag this June, "We must make the European Union capable of enlargement. This requires institutional reform." But, at present, there does not seem to be much appetite among the member states for changes to the EU's policies and governance structures, especially if they entail amendments to the treaties.

⁷ Emerson, Michael; Milena Lazarević; Steven Blockmans; and Strahinja Subotić (2021), "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies. Herszenhorn, David M.; Hans von der Burchard; and Maïa de La Baume, "Macron floats European 'community' open to Ukraine and UK", POLITICO, 09 May 2022

⁸ Mucznik, Marta (2022), "The (geo)political community and enlargement reform: two important but separate discussions", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

At the June Council, EU leaders made only a cursory acknowledgement of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which ended in May and produced a substantial package of reform proposals across a wide range of policy areas. Among those, a specific call adopted in the European Citizens' Panel on foreign policy for "a strong vision and common strategy to consolidate the unity and decision taking capacity of the EU in order to prepare the Union for further enlargement" (recommendation # 21) but also an explicit recommendation (#21) in the [final report](#) of the Conference to introduce qualified majority voting (QMV) in foreign policy. Doing away with the unanimity requirement in the enlargement dossier, where member states have abused their veto power on more than one occasion, sounds like a reasonable way forward. But it is not yet clear why member states would agree to renounce this right and unanimity is required for such a change to occur.

In general, not all European institutions are on the same page regarding reform. The European Parliament has already responded to the Conference by [calling](#) for a European Convention and the Commission's own [analysis](#) of the Conference proposals does not dismiss the possibility of treaty change. Where new legislative proposals might be needed, the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [promised](#) to address them in her State of the Union speech in September. Member states, though, remain divided on the matter. Some 13 countries from Northern, Central and Eastern Europe already [expressed opposition](#) to "premature attempts to launch a process towards Treaty change", arguing that recent crises have shown "how much the EU can deliver within the current Treaty framework." In contrast, six 'core' member states (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Spain)⁹ [declared](#) themselves "in principle open to necessary treaty changes that are jointly defined" through an inter-institutional process.

The [lack of unity](#) among EU countries betrays little ambition at a time when the EU should prepare the new era – or, as Chancellor Scholz dubbed it, a *Zeitenwende* – more and better than ever before.¹⁰ Such short-sighted and misguided way of dealing with this watershed moment for Europe could defer much-needed fundamental reforms to put the Union in a stronger position to deal with future challenges. It would also amount to a lost opportunity to confront the long-standing 'elephant in the room' – i.e. the EU's capacity to absorb new entrants. Thus, while the member states are busy trying to get their act together, enlargement might be downplayed and emerge as collateral damage. This scenario would hurt the aspirant countries but, in the long run, it will likely hurt the EU more.

Given the resilience of the member states' 'wait and see' approach to the dossier, the next events to watch out for are coming up in autumn: von der Leyen's State of the Union address in September and the Prague Summit in October. Neither might change the minds of EU capitals on fundamental reforms and enlargement. Yet, they could bring more clarity about the direction of travel in the future and maybe even some steps forward. At the present critical juncture, any bit of progress will count.

⁹ This group likely includes France, which opted to maintain a neutral position while at the helm of the EU Council Presidency.

¹⁰ See also, Zuleeg, Fabian and Janis A. Emmanouilidis (2022), "Europe's moment of truth: united by adversity?", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

