

Enlargement imperative. Is the EU on an adequate path?



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The unprecedented environment in which Ukraine has been preparing for EU membership, reminds that the fight for Ukraine's future goes beyond the battlefield and security guarantees, including its reconstruction and integration with the European Union. This accession is not only about the benefits of membership for Ukraine, it is also about Ukraine taking its share of responsibility for the European continent. In short, this is a path toward a stronger and more resilient Europe, a historic opportunity for Ukraine and for Europe regarding development of new markets, strengthening of supply chains, and of stability in a region historically prone to instability.



Ukraine's close ties with the European Union did not begin with its application for membership. They have been growing since 1994, when the first EU-Ukraine partnership agreement was signed. At that time, and also after the 2004 enlargement, both the European Commission and the European Parliament, maintained close contacts with Ukraine in support of institutionalizing the relations, including trade, single market, regional policy and democracy.

It is also true that when at the beginning of 1990s preparing the first ever Eastern enlargement had begun, Ukrainian politicians and officials were expressing their deep worries that this major Eastern enlargement would be a new European iron curtain.

Enlargement then and now

There are many similarities between the Eastern enlargements of the European Union in 2004, 2007 and 2013, but there are also differences. Certainly, their enormous geostrategic importance and democratic consolidation of this part of the continent gave a strong base for making this gigantic step. From the economic point of view, it was both a challenge and an unprecedented opportunity. But it was also a huge administrative effort for countries with no tradition of civil service, no capabilities of horizontal coordination, or territorial solidarity, with dominant vertical structures, low wages and social status of those employed in public administration.

In the 1990s, when countries of Central and Eastern Europe were preparing for EU accession, the world around was divided. New countries emerged practicing democracy but assertive regimes of autocrats and dictators of all kinds remained in the neighborhood.



Accession to the EU was a guarantee of the irreversibility of the transition to a market economy and democracy, freedom and security.

Today, geopolitical polarization in the world is much stronger and unpredictable. The European Union is undergoing a profound revolution, reinventing itself to boost its security, competitiveness potential and its global role. Transatlantic relations, which used to be mutually reinforcing, are no longer so. Political will among 27 member states to move forward on the new “big bang enlargement” does not seem cast in stone. We might rather see a well-known from more than twenty years old discussions model of a slowly moving forward regata, with Montenegro and Albania already identified by the Commission as frontrunners.

Long gap

While before 2004 opponents of the enlargement came up with a theory that the Union should first deepen and only then expand, the only reform imperative was related to political reform. Eventually, the treaty was amended. This was considered to be justified by the necessity of institutional adjustments. This paradigm of linking the enlargement imperative with reform imperative, though for many still valid, does not lead this time around to the political will of deeply needed institutional reforms.

In 2022, when Ukraine and Moldova received the candidate status, joining other candidate countries, the intention was to demonstrate to Putin what was Europe’s preferred political order on our continent. That was European geopolitical reaction to the aggression. While previous Eastern enlargements were about democracy, the current one



is first of all about security. Yet, security is not part of the accession negotiations. Accession is not discussed within the framework of security guarantees. While not all EU members are NATO members, enhanced defence cooperation implies collective defence efforts. Also, we see growing presence of China in the candidate countries, expanding its influence which is linked to security.

The questionnaires and the screening could have allowed the Commission to link better enlargement and defence policies to evaluate the candidates' readiness for a geopolitically stronger Europe and alignment of the defence sectors. Of course, greater EU oversight in this field could be rejected by candidates or member states, but then another mechanism would be needed for the enlarged Union to ensure defence cooperation leading to integration and interoperability in the security domain, in particular for non-NATO states.

Enlargement issues

There are some aspects of the current enlargement process, where doubts emerge regarding its adequacy to the challenges and forces behind it.

a) abuse by some member states of using the negotiation blocking power.

This is not a total novelty, but its geopolitical and ideological nature is. The tradition of blocking accession negotiations started with Greece blocking in 2008 Macedonia which was preparing to join NATO and was at that time also the most advanced candidate for the EU membership in the Western Balkans. The agreement was reached in 2018, but



then the veto came from Bulgaria demanding from the Northern Macedonia a change of its constitution.

There is no doubt that both vetoes had dramatically negative impact not only on the enlargement process but also on political situation in the candidate country. Hungary vetoes the initiation of negotiations with Ukraine, pairing it with Moldova, for which a legal basis does not exist. This is also true for the continuation of the system where all elements of negotiation process are approved through unanimity. This is not demanded by the treaties and is a sheer political practice.

b) evolution of enlargement narrative.

There seemed to be understanding that Ukraine's accession cannot be considered in the cost and benefit perspective only. There is hardly any public visibility of a debate about how the EU will benefit from this enlargement economically and geopolitically, and how the global influence of Europe will be strengthened. The same is true for not so long ago prevailing understanding that Ukraine's accession would strengthen the EU competitiveness and innovation potential.

A deeper reflection on the new enlargement takes place mostly in some of the European think tanks. Lack of political understanding of the risk related to extending the negotiation period, in particular in case of Ukraine, leading to a kind of permanent candidate status, known only too well by some candidates from Western Balkans, not to mention Turkey, generates a risk that as time goes by, especially as the war drags on, public opinion in the EU could shift towards perceiving Ukraine as a burden.



We know from the history of enlargement policy that due to the lengthy accession process, reform fatigue, public trust both in candidates' own capabilities to do it and in the EU declines. Experience shows that negotiations should not last more than four years. There might also be French referendum on the next enlargement, which will be decided by the newly elected President as there are elections in 2027 in France. This election will decide on the integration of Europe. While a new narrative on enlargement is needed, it should not be just narrative staying within the think tanks debates, but getting a real political life. Not as a selling exercise but a real open debate which might help to avoid strategic mistakes.

c) probability of the Treaty change and introduction of a new generation of Accession Treaty.

While this enlargement seems to be a European imperative, its link with European reforms, not so long ago seen as necessary, has been lost. At the same time the European Commission President made it clear that there is no appetite for Treaty change. But she has announced a new generation of Accession Treaty. That might imply redefinition of what membership means which sounds deeply controversial. That might also mean that those ready to join from day one would not be granted full rights as member states enjoy. It seems that this approach goes beyond transition periods or enhanced cooperation, and implies some sort of safeguards followed by additional verification mechanisms. That might mean going back to the mechanism applied to Bulgaria and Romania which did not pass a test of effectiveness.



In political statements the issue of long transition periods, no veto power or accession subject to trial period are also mentioned. We might be back to the concept of enlargement based on the principle “all but institutions”. The Union would wait first for its own political will to introduce institutional reform and then proceed with full rights for new members. So, it would be a solution without legal basis. What is worrying is that this approach might lead to a different from already established concept of the progressive enlargement.

When it was proposed by the European Commission it was not trusted by the Ukrainians who saw it as a delaying full accession factor. Many of us engaged in supporting it as an option actually accelerating the participation in the single market. Potentially redefined progressive integration might indeed be used as an integration mechanism for a slower process. That might mean that the new generation of Accession Treaty could offer progressive integration which in reality would be rather a regressive one. I would like to insist on serious exploration by Ukraine under constructive umbrella of the Commission of all available options of progressive integration, the gradual expansion of the internal market to Ukraine, to ensure progress in coping with integration by companies operating in Ukraine which will have to face strong competition and change, in particular by large state-owned enterprises that employ a lot of local labor and would be restructured, possibly closed or privatized. The very fact that this type of ideas appear in public domain is taking the credibility of the enlargement process down which in the stormy time does not allow Europe to enhance its global position, its democracy consolidation, its security.



d) reform proposal for European policies in the context of next enlargement, including budgetary and institutional changes.

A commitment for such a review was made by the President of the Commission in the European Parliament in March 2024. In this context several research institutions made proposals regarding the cost of this enlargement for the European budget. The commitment was several times postponed, the last date mentioned was the November 4th, combining the policy review with the enlargement package 2025. Again, there was no report on that date. In the meantime, in October 2025 the EP has adopted their own report.

It is certainly good to hear from time to time from the European Council that enlargement is the best geopolitical investment of the Union. It is clear that Russian invasion on Ukraine and the political situation in Belarus are a proof of the failure of both European neighborhood and enlargement policies. But between February 2022 and beginning of 2026 four years have passed, accession negotiations with Ukraine cannot be triggered due to the fact that one member state is blocking them.

In the meantime, the Chinese expansion in Europe has exploded. The failure of presenting the reform of policies which could have started the debate on reforms indispensable for further enlargement shows rather a cautious position of the European Commission in the context of the ambiguity of the Council. The possibility of the big enlargement is off the table. Whatever the enlargement model will be and I think the most likely a kind of regatta approach will be the reality, one day the moment will be reached when there will be the Union of 35.



It is not questioned that the future of these countries that are in the accession process is in the EU. However, the longer this process lasts the more time is offered to nationalists who are against the needed reforms, with or without enlargement. It seems clear that in spite of stormy times and global uncertainty there is no political courage even to start European debate on reforms that would create institutional absorption capacity. At the end there will be unanimity needed to approve the change, but there is no need of unanimity to launch the reflection.

And it is unimaginable that one day the EU could say to the candidates that it is not ready to offer them the membership. There is no reason why a coalition of the willing could not launch such a debate. It is very important that the Union spares no effort and does not allow that in public domain appear ideas that are taking the credibility of the enlargement process down. This is undermining Europe's objective to enhance its global position, its democracy consolidation, its security.

e) debate on the new multi annual European budget for 2028-34.

It will be reflecting changes in European policies of importance to Ukraine and its relations with the EU. Little is known about what cohesion and agricultural policies Ukraine will join. It cannot be ruled out that the EU will create a single fund, modelled on the Ukrainian Facility, which will be a comprehensive source of financing for reconstruction through grants and loans, and to which communes, regions, and districts will apply. There might not be either a classic cohesion policy for member states, which in the new multi annual budget may be implemented through a single joint plan covering cohesion policy and some part of rural development. It would be hard to imagine no



impact of the MFF debate on the dynamics of the Ukraine's accession. The EU will need to seek and identify solutions that accommodate different interests across European policies. In particular, it will be detrimental to find a win-win solution in the common agricultural policy.

Ukraine's accession to the EU will entail costs, but it will also stimulate economic growth in the EU through trade and investment, propensity to innovate and technological advancement. There will also be thrifty Member States, watching every penny in the EU budget, and there will be big beneficiaries of European funds, worried about their prospects. But there is no other option. The best path to creating a new political order in Europe has been set.

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