

Background

On 14 December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and granted candidate status to Georgia, provided that relevant reforms are continued in those countries. This was a major decision for the EU “re-opening” the enlargement path, which has been stalling for the last decade, but also a serious geopolitical move potentially defining the future of the EU. In his tweet, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rejoiced at the decision of the European Council, defining it as “a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe. A victory that motivates, inspires, and strengthens”. Along with six other Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and potentially Kosovo), they are considered to make the next EU accession countries to be accepted once conditions are met. While enlargement negotiations are likely to take time, the EU is unlikely to be replenished with new members until at least 2030; a colossal amount of preparation must be made in the candidate countries, the EU, and its current Member States. Candidate countries need to implement political, economic, legal, and social reforms as a merit-based approach can guarantee better preparedness for the accession and more unity after the enlargement. Still, it is equally important that the EU and current Member States are ready to accept new members and adjust EU policies, budget, and institutions if needed. The abovementioned December European Council has also decided to address the EU’s internal reforms and to adopt conclusions on a roadmap for future work by summer 2024. Thus, sincere and comprehensive discussions on the potential challenges and consequences of these reforms should be carried out at the Governmental level as well as the communication strategies should be directed to both the societies of the candidate countries and current Member States.

EU Institutional Adaptations for Future Enlargement

Although it is still difficult to predict how the enlargement advances (scenarios, timeline), discussions on the most probable and most desired roadmap of enlargement are starting. **The EU has to work on the roadmap for transitional integration, outlining intermediary steps for candidate countries to progress towards EU membership and the internal reforms.** It is essential that the EU will embark onto these discussions better sooner than later, as the preparation for the enlargement takes a long time. Merit-based approach should be the core of the enlargement negotiations. Homework, however, must be done on both sides – the candidate states and the EU, also member states. Candidates must implement necessary reforms. The EU must create and maintain incentives to encourage these reforms in candidate countries in particularly addressing issues such as corruption, freedom of the press, and judiciary independence. **The work on preparing for the changes in the EU policies and budgets to accommodate new members should start immediately after the European Parliament elections** take place and the new leadership of the EU institutions starts its work.” Moreover, in the unstable security environment issues such as alignment in foreign policy and security considerations should also be considered. Reconsideration of criteria for conditionality to include security components reflecting the evolving realities in the negotiation process and addressing security concerns, including border disputes, bilateral conflicts between the candidates, and the impact of external factors like sanctions against Russia, should be debated.

The appetite for substantial institutional reforms in the EU has faded, but it is still important to make sure that the EU is prepared for the enlargement and the EU institutions continue to function effectively. **Political leadership by well-functioning EU is particularly needed in overcoming challenges and advancing enlargement efforts, as institutional changes alone may not be sufficient without strong leadership.** The EU enlargement can proceed without the treaty changes, utilizing existing instruments like constructive abstention and decision-making mechanisms outlined in the Lisbon Treaty. Noteworthy that the effectiveness of the EU institutions depends more on domestic politics and the alignment of national interests than on institutional reforms. Unfortunately, divergence in national interests and unilateral actions could pose challenges to decision-making processes. The trend towards protectionism and unilateral actions in European countries and the United States could hinder further integration and enlargement efforts. **Despite the benefits of enlargement, challenges arise from domestic political situations, including skepticism towards trade liberalization, accelerated enlargement of the common market and protection of interest groups, particularly in agricultural sector.** The dispersed nature of power within the EU between member states and institutions suggests the necessity for a leadership to maintain the momentum behind the relaunching of EU enlargement.

Along with the road map for enlargement and reforms in the EU **to accommodate candidate countries it is equally important to ensure that the decision-making process throughout negotiations would be allowed to continue according to the progress of reforms made to meet accession criteria** rather than becoming hostage of some EU member state because of its domestic politics. The current decision-making system, based on unanimity, could be exploited by certain member states for their own interests. EU enlargement process might be influenced by internal politics of member states, potentially hindering progress. Growing trend of protectionism within European countries, poses a challenge to the benefits of enlargement, particularly in terms of accessing the common market.

One of the major concerns regarding the future EU enlargement in the member states is the situation of rule of law and corruption in candidate countries. Corruption can undermine institutions and finances, posing a significant obstacle to progress with the accession reforms. **Therefore, addressing corruption should be the primary goal in the candidate countries, to enhance the credibility and integrity of their bids for the EU membership.** Progress in anti-corruption reforms is necessary to demonstrate positive developments and enhance the perception of candidate states within the EU.

Effective negotiations and functioning of the EU after the enlargement are linked to the discussion on the expansion of the use of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV). The ongoing discussions evolve around question, whether the focus should be on broad qualitative changes or targeted adjustments to enhance the capacity to act effectively. While the QMV has a potential to facilitate compromise and negotiation dynamics, one has also to acknowledge concerns about the risk of marginalizing certain member states. Flexibility, such as allowing opt-out options, is necessary to accommodate diverse national interests while maintaining cohesion within the EU but not compromising effective management and cooperation among the EU member states. **But above all the key element for effective decision making is trust, which cannot be achieved by entirely excluding member states from decision taking.**

The EU accession process brings significant benefits for candidate countries, including societal transformation, respect for democratic values, economic development, and improved living standards. Despite the benefits, the accession is a demanding and energy-consuming process. Political figures in candidate countries often prioritize short-term political gains over long-term European integration goals and that leads to a slow progress. Southeast European countries face specific challenges in the accession process related limited institutional capacity and ongoing state-building. Access to pre-accession funds is conditional and can be difficult to achieve. Societies in these areas are unstable, there are ongoing struggles for political legitimacy. Populist leaders, often associated

with autocratic tendencies, wield considerable influence in the region. Engaging with populist leaders poses challenges for the EU's normative power. While the EU may choose to overlook certain misdeeds in hope of maintaining a dialogue, it risks undermining its leverage and credibility in the region. **The EU must adopt a strategic and consistent approach to enlargement, ensuring clear communication about membership perspectives, with a strong emphasis on merit-based approach and providing visible pre-accession assistance.**

Euros and Dialogues: Aligning EU Budget Revision and Strategic Communication

The seriousness of the EU intentions to proceed with the enlargement could be measured against the willingness of member states to open discussions on the EU budget revision. The enlargement needs must be reflected already in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and more substantial changes must be made later. **Strategic decision-making based on scientific research and impact assessments is crucial for the EU to avoid the pitfalls of short-term political cycles and populism in this discussion.** The focus in the current debates is on the upcoming reform of the MFF and the implications of the enlargement on the cohesion funds and Common Agricultural policy (CAP). Many concerns are being raised regarding the inflation, competition, and the need for stability in funding allocation. Additionally, there is a debate on the effectiveness of cross-border financing for cohesion projects. Reform efforts in the EU should focus on diversifying revenue sources, prioritizing long-term investments, balancing national interests, managing economic disparities, addressing bureaucracy, and promoting transparency and accountability. Efforts to create a more civilized political discourse providing a space for politicians to engage in meaningful debate are essential for overcoming polarization and promoting effective governance. **Promoting political education and fostering leadership skills could improve the quality of political debate. The role of public administration in having a high-quality debate is key.**

There is a necessity for open and wide-ranging debates within individual countries regarding the EU enlargement, addressing fears and concerns openly rather than allowing them to be exploited by political spoilers. Economic factors, such as the potential impact on national budgets and migration patterns, need to be openly addressed to alleviate fears and uncertainties. Progress in the EU enlargement depends heavily on the support and leadership of national governments, who must openly advocate for enlargement and communicate its benefits to the public. Highlighting the tangible benefits of the EU membership, such as prosperity, stability, and security, based on lived experiences, can effectively convey the advantages of integration. **There is also a need to shift the perspective of the debates in the EU: from seeking investments from the EU to becoming investors,** particularly in countries nearing the 90% threshold for cohesion funding eligibility. Communicating complex financial information in a clear and accessible manner is key to ensuring public understanding and support for the EU policies and initiatives. **Recognizing past enlargements and their successes, such as embracing 100 million people into the EU, is crucial for fostering support for future enlargements and integration efforts.** Central and Eastern European countries must effectively communicate the benefits and shortcomings of EU membership, acknowledging both achievements and areas for improvement. citizens.

Identifying and addressing right stakeholders is key to a successful communication both in the EU members and candidate countries. It is essential to reach them and emphasize benefits of enlargement such as investments, business opportunities, open markets, and consumer advantages. Efforts should be made to clearly communicate for the candidates that the benefits they experience stem from the EU membership, rather than from other countries like Russia, China, or Turkey. **EU members should play a role in facilitating the transformation of candidate countries, helping them bridge the gap between the promise of the EU membership, expectations, and the reality on the ground.** This is crucial for maintaining the momentum of progress and preventing stagnation.