

Enlargement: a Tool for the EU, a Prospect for Our Neighbours

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Initially launched by six founding members yearning for reconciliation, European construction was meant from the outset to open up to its neighbours. With the collapse of the dictatorships in the south and the erection of the Iron Curtain in the east, it took the EU over two decades to enlarge and to embrace a large part of the European continent. This enlargement strategy proved to be a formidable foreign policy tool, allowing the EU to contribute to the political stability and economic development of its neighbouring countries. It also made it possible to establish an economic and political area comprising over 500 million citizens, with all of the attendant benefits both in terms of purchasing power and in the diplomatic sphere. Nor has it proved an obstacle in the way of a deepening of European policies, which can be implemented either at the EU level or, whenever necessary, also within narrower contexts (as we have seen in the field of economic governance).

The 2004 enlargement, however, had an impact on today's perception of the future of relations between the EU and its neighbours: on the one hand, because it led to the integration of countries whose level of prosperity stood far below the European average; and on the other, because in bringing the number of member states up to 25 (and to 27 in 2007), it turned the EU into a more heterogeneous affair and made it more complex to govern. This triggered a tendency both in grassroots opinion and among politicians to wrongly blame the EU's woes, not to mention their own countries' difficulties, on the new entries.

This negative view of enlargement is by no means unanimously subscribed to within the EU, as the latest "Eurobarometer" poll on the topic clearly shows. Grassroots opinion is still favourable to enlargement in over half of the member states, particularly in central Europe but also in some of the older member states, such as Sweden. The poll shows that support for enlargement dropped overall between 2008 and 2010, but that it has made a recovery since then. It tells us that, while grassroots opinion adopts a tougher stance on the issue in those countries worst hit by the crisis such as Ireland and Greece, that stance can also take root in countries less affected by the crisis such as Finland.

All in all, it is by no means certain that the latest developments in the crisis have profoundly altered the positions either of the citizens or of the member states. What the crisis has done, on the other hand, is to call into question the deregulation measures in the international financial system, while the main fears voiced in relation to competition from low-wage countries tends to focus, rather, on such non-European countries as China.

Thus enlargement strategy is still topical today, if for no other reason than that a number of neighbouring countries still aspire to join the EU, which remains an attractive model for the sharing of sovereignty and for economic and political solidarity. The strategy is probably not perfect and it would be worthwhile tweaking it, particularly in terms of more stringent monitoring to ensure that countries joining the EU meet their membership requirements, and with Europe taking increased responsibility for the victims of the relocations that their membership might entail. In any event,

enlargement strategy is a medium-term affair (membership negotiations can last up to 10 years) and thus it must be revised or made more flexible along the process for structural rather than cyclical reasons.

On this basis, the EU needs to offer the prospect of membership to those western Balkan states that meet the preliminary conditions and make the progress required of them, as was recently the case of Serbia. And the same applies to Iceland, which should not find it too difficult to join the EU. The Europeans continue to be split over Turkey's future, its calling to join the EU or not having a negative impact on people's overall perception of enlargement. Membership negotiations, which the member states as a group decided should get under way in the first place, must now be pursued without setting any boundary markers on the outcome they aspire to achieve and without prejudging their future developments, but only on condition that Turkey makes progress in its reforms. The short-term challenge is to "get Europe into Turkey", not the other way around.

And lastly, enlargement must be viewed in the context of a global strategy encompassing all of the EU's neighbours, not all of which are inclined to join, of course. The important thing is to clarify their status in order to enable us to identify the EU's "new borders". The Arab Spring provides us with a historic opportunity to strengthen the other pillar of the EU's external action, namely its "neighbourhood policy" both to the south and to the east. But quite apart from enlargement, it is in the EU's vital interest for it to build its relations with all of its neighbours on a common basis consisting of interdependence and of shared values, and to thus forge a fully-fledged pillar of influence on the international stage.

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