

How enlargement accomplishes European unity while changing its nature



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#europeanunion
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The issue of enlargement, which has hitherto been experienced as the achievement of the European project, is now evolving against a new international backdrop. This situation compels the European Union to move beyond conventional legal and geographical considerations, towards a genuinely geopolitical approach to its relations with its environment. The European Political Community is predicated on a remodelling of the continent brought about by the war in Ukraine.¹

The war in Ukraine has pushed the issue of enlargement back to the forefront of the European political agenda. The candidate status that was quickly conferred upon Ukraine, Moldova and lately to Bosnia and Herzegovina, in addition to the accession negotiations that have finally been opened with North Macedonia and Albania, are recent breakthroughs for a policy that appeared to have stalled. Reducing the European Union (EU) from 28 to 27 Member States, Brexit had sent the opposite message to enlargement. Yet is this new momentum to become a long-term trend? Will it strengthen the Union or, conversely, weaken it?

The enlargement process cannot be dissociated from a broader reflexions on the continent's unity. The new project for a European Political Community launched by President Macron and for which the very first summit was held is part of this approach. Enlargement challenges the historical, geographical and institutional dimensions of European construction. **While it fulfils the European project, it also changes its course.**

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¹ An original version in French of this article was published in Ifri's review *Politique étrangère*, Dec.2022

I • Enlargement, a history of democratisation

The best-known history of European construction is a series of dates of treaties settling varying levels of integration and dates of the successive accessions of States to the growing Union. The European Community was once made up of six Member States, then nine, ten, twelve, fifteen, next at a stroke twenty-five and then twenty-seven. And even twenty-eight, before Brexit brought a sudden end to the myth of the “ever closer Union” with the United Kingdom’s full exit. Enlargement, which had until then progressed onward, gave way to an amputation of the EU. Following the 2016 British referendum, there were even fears of a knock-on effect, such as the “Frexit” topic which left its mark on the 2017 French presidential campaign. Yet nothing came of this. No Member State is currently considering leaving the EU, which on the contrary is attracting new membership applications.

Both Brexit, on one side, and accessions, on the other, speak to what the European Union fundamentally expresses: a common democratic choice. The EU is not an empire as it does not oblige any country to join², or now even to remain³. A desire to join is primarily a sovereign decision of the applicant country and the unanimous acceptance of all the others at each stage of the accession process. The EU does not solicit any applications.

This is only conceivable, however, when the country operates as a fully-fledged representative democracy, a fact that was made official in 1993 by the so-called Copenhagen criteria. Following the first enlargement in 1973, the history of the subsequent waves of accessions went hand-in-hand with the establishment of democracy on the continent. Greece’s association with the European Economic Community (EEC) was frozen during the Colonels’ Regime, and the accession process was resumed following the fall of this dictatorship. Franco’s Spain failed to join the EEC, despite a formal request in 1962, and Portugal began the process upon the death of Salazar. The fall of the Iron Curtain to the East paved the way for countries freed from Soviet communism, leading to the swift accession of neutral nations as early as 1995 (Austria, Finland, Sweden, which were already fully-formed democracies). Lastly, the consolidation of democracy is one of the key requirements in the membership process of countries from former Yugoslavia.

It can therefore be said that EU membership applications often mark a shift from authoritarianism to democracy. The application of Ukraine, however, aims to prevent a shift in the opposite direction. Submitted following the Russian invasion, in the midst of war, it asserts Ukraine’s aim, which is exactly what Moscow wants to destroy, namely that of becoming a respectful liberal democracy.

In any event, and to prevent critical situations such as the one currently playing out in Hungary, **the consolidation of democracy stands out today as the guiding principle of enlargement**. Its progress depends on this. The new chapter-based negotiation method adopted in 2020 under pressure from France also aims to promote this pre-requisite to accession. The latest reports on the EU’s relations with the different countries in the Western Balkans, published on 12 October 2022, all insist once again on European requirements with regard to the rule of law. Negotiations with Turkey’s Erdoğan have been blocked since the purges following the failed *coup d’état* in the summer of 2016 and the Commission recently said that Turkey is tending to “move away from the EU”.

However, the Turkish application and Georgia’s membership application primarily challenge the geographical scope of European construction.

² For example, Norwegians voted against membership twice by referendum, in 1974 and in 1994.

³ The United Kingdom withdrew from the EU voluntarily and legally, pursuant to article 50 of the the Treaty on European Union.

II • Enlargement, a geography open to interpretation

Enlargement is a process that challenges the EU as to the limits of its own expansion. Before even getting to the criterion of democracy, the first point marking eligibility to join the EU is being a “European” State, without further clarification. This criterion constituted the grounds for rejecting Morocco’s application in 1987 – the only refusal for geographical reasons – but the case of Turkey demonstrates an ambiguity. The country which sometimes calls itself Balkan in fact only has a foothold on the continent, in East Thrace (3% of its territory).

For other applications under study (Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova), the rooting in the European continent is obvious⁴. The same goes for Iceland, which was officially acknowledged as a candidate for EU accession from 2010, until its withdrawal in 2015. At the other end of the continent, if the application of Georgia were accepted, it would raise the question of eligibility for membership for other Caucasus countries, although they are already members of the Council of Europe and of the new European Political Community (Armenia and Azerbaijan).

The famous Schuman Declaration of 1950 was aimed at “all Europeans, regardless of whether they are from the East or the West” and its objective was “the coming together of the nations of Europe”. The maintained vagueness regarding the EU’s potential scope to the East in terms of Europe’s geography gives enlargement an infinite feel which may foster uncertainty. How many members will the Europe of the future have? 30, 35 or more?

The lack of permanent or predefined borders may weaken the EU’s projection as a power. At the same time, **this ambiguity surrounding potential membership to the EU enables it to underpin its appeal and exert its influence on these countries.** It would be deprived of this possibility if it shut down any plans for new membership. European vocabulary thus has been enriched with diplomatic expressions such as “European perspective” and “European family”, which leave open the possibility of accession without ever making it clear, still less ensuring it, and which make a range of other types of relations possible.

A feeling of belonging to Europe appears to be more difficult to root in a bloc with a shifting shape and uncertain borders. Yet this is precisely what allows **this feeling to be defined less in terms of a delineated territory or specific geography and more on the basis of collective memory and a common destiny.** European construction founded its project for peace and fostered its own narrative following the trauma of Nazi occupation suffered by many European peoples and that of the First World War, in which Europe was the main battleground.

The enlargement of the EU towards countries in the former Eastern bloc, some of which were part of the former USSR, traumatised by Soviet domination and the current war waged by Vladimir Putin, forges a new memory that is collective but shared in a different way. **From a solution to the German issue, European integration is becoming a response to the Russian issue.** The applications of Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans do not simply represent a potential expansion of the European internal market from 450 to 515 million inhabitants in an EU with 35 Member States. They bring with them another memory and another perception of the threat, which may refocus European policy.

This is why the next enlargements, rather than simply extending the existing EU, may change the nature of the integration project itself.

4 Some geographers located the continent’s geographical centre in the current Ukraine.

III • Enlargement, a far-reaching transformation

In 1950, the first European Community was created in response to the German issue, firstly with a view to preventing the resurgence of a new conflict and then, with the Common Market introduced by the Treaty of Rome in 1957, to pacifying relations between States through trade exchanges that linked their common interests. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, the European Union and the plan for a single currency were launched to create a strong anchoring of post-89 Germany.

In these two major moments of European integration, undertaken due to these exceptional historical circumstances, enlargement followed along the lines of the initial momentum. Each new Member State had to fully adopt the existing legislation and policies prior to their own enlargement negotiation (the *acquis*) and ensure compliance before taking up a place as a Member. From a Europe of six Member States to the current twenty-seven, Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg have remained the original institutional heart of the Union. All new Members had to create a presence there, even the most distant ones.

Against this backdrop, each enlargement becomes an additional add-on to the same initial project, adapting the rules without radically overhauling them. Accessions came one after the other without any concept of spheres of influence, power relations, power struggles or enmity. Enlargement is an unconsidered move for Europe, which is primarily designed for a deepening of integration. If there is a European narrative, it is first and foremost shaped by a succession of “concrete achievements”, to state Schuman: the Single market, Schengen, Erasmus, the Euro, etc. New Member States’ access to these achievements is a testament to their success (Croatia is preparing to adopt the single currency and join Schengen on 1st January 2023). In this respect, enlargement is nothing but the EU on a larger scale, a reproduction of its model, the achievement of the European project. It is not a foreign policy, as any European nation is potentially eligible to apply. The massive enlargement to the East in 2004, which increased the EU from 15 to 25 Member States, has been symbolic of this approach.

Yet enlargement is not a process that has no effect on the very essence of the European project, particularly when it comes to large countries. The failure of British membership with Brexit and the deadlock of the Turkish application are singular examples of this. De Gaulle’s two vetoes concerning the United Kingdom’s membership implied this in a way. From De Gaulle’s standpoint, this first enlargement would not have been painless and ran the risk of placing a project that he intended above all to be emancipatory of Atlanticist influence. Once a Member State, the UK consistently impeded any deepening of the EU, exercising vetoes, rebates and opt-outs to carve out a special place for itself within the EU, though this ultimately did not stop it from choosing Brexit.

In a very different way, Turkey’s application – which was supported by the UK – has since been hindered by institutional and geopolitical upheavals that such an enlargement to include a regional power with more than 84 million inhabitants would cause for the EU. The current freezing of accession negotiations leaves the issue in deadlock, that may come up again following the Turkish elections expected for next June and the European elections of 2024.

IV • The plan for integration heralds not only a change in scale, but also in nature

With Ukraine's membership application, the EU suddenly found itself facing wholly different limits to its integration project, which not only changes scale but also nature. This application and the one submitted by Moldova cannot be dissociated from the circumstances which precipitated them: the war waged by Russia that is a direct threat to the rest of the continent. In conferring candidate status on these two nations, the EU-27 have actually freed themselves from any prevention of impinging on what Russia considers to be its area of influence. This is what had been avoided until the war, preferring for these countries, and others, association agreements which were implicitly considered as alternatives to membership. The integration of the three Baltic States, former Soviet republics, did not constitute any real intrusion into the "Russian world", from Moscow's point of view. Although the EU, when defining its relations with the rest of the world, had until now refrained from considering the continent in terms of influence pertaining to any power play in the way, the perspective of further enlargement including Ukraine, even in a far future, forces it to become geopolitical. As Gilles Gressani, Director of *Le Grand Continent*, summed up in *Le Monde*: "[The war] has helped to territorialize a construction that tended more to consider its action in geographically abstract terms: market, consumers, companies".

Enlargement to other countries of the former Yugoslavia is already forcing the EU to take up a geopolitical position. Here, the accessions aim to limit influence from China, Russia and Turkey in the Balkans. These influences are underway and run contrary to European interests. Such strategic considerations were less significant during the previous waves of enlargement. These future accessions, like those of Ukraine and Moldova, will require the EU to invest further still in external borders that are difficult to control, deal with contested zones, prevent hostile foreign interference (cyber-attacks, desinformation campaign), strengthen civilian protection and protect minorities.

These are all issues that the EU institutions, developed for primarily economic purpose (competition, trade, cohesion), were not designed to manage and that transform the nature of the European project.

Defence, energy supply, resilient value chains and critical infrastructure security have become the main concerns of European action. More broadly, **faced with various geopolitical upheavals which have resulted in new applications to join the EU, it is less a desire for prosperity through free trade but more the vital need for economic security that forges European unity** and motivates integration in new areas. These and not just enlargement require an institutional rethinking of the EU.

V • Enlargement, institutional boundaries

Alongside the new European policies brought about by the war and its ramifications come the old institutional questions which resurface at each wave of enlargement regarding the functioning of the EU and which foster debate about its transformation. The number of European commissioners, raised for example by German Chancellor Scholz in his address on Europe given on 29 August 2022 in Prague, the new distribution between countries of MEPs, the number of whom is capped, and the efficiency of the decision-making process are among the other topics of reform that must be anticipated. In particular, debate focuses on a new reduction in the scope of decisions requiring unanimity (foreign policy, tax) at the Council of the EU, in anticipation of a Europe with 35 Member States. This reduction would be made

by extending qualified majority voting (55% of Member States representing at least 65% of the EU population). Without amending the treaties, such a shift to qualified majority voting could be made possible through bridging clauses (a unanimous decision to move to majority voting). For the time being, **constructive abstention** may be a practical means of avoiding a veto-induced stalemate, and **differentiated integration** opens up prospects for States wishing to move forward together in a specific area.

We are still in a period of institutional tinkering rather than a full overhaul. The political conditions in various Member States (Italy, Sweden, Hungary and Poland, *inter alia*) make it difficult to envisage an opening of a treaty revision process to serve a new stage of integration, at least in the near future. However, the series of crises, which have constantly challenged Europeans since the 2008 financial crisis, tell us that **the efficiency of EU action is not only dependent on the number of Member States**, but above all on a common understanding of the almost existential seriousness of the collective crisis requiring resolution. European powers develop by force of the circumstances to be overcome. One case in point is the EU's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic (recovery plan and joint vaccination campaign). Today, the seriousness of the external risks that must be averted, such as Russian threat, and the better acknowledged need for European sovereignty in response to the rivalry between the US and China calls for unity between the EU-27, beyond any form of institutional sophistication.

VI • The budgetary constraints of an enlarged Europe

The shortcomings in how an enlarged Europe would operate may be primarily budgetary. Membership of the Balkan nations and former USSR countries, which have much lower living standards than countries currently in the EU (the per capita gross domestic product in Ukraine is significantly lower than that of Bulgaria, which is the poorest of EU-27), heralds the arrival of new States that are net beneficiaries of the European budget. These countries, Ukraine in particular, would be eligible for regional funds and the Common Agricultural Policy, implying a sharp rise in expenditure and possibly a new distribution. Depending on the state of accession procedures with the Western Balkans, European negotiations on the next post-2027 multiannual financial framework are set to be the most gruelling to date, unless these European policies are completely overhauled.

The financial generosity expected of the EU with regard to its new Members would require the latter to prove an ability to manage European funding in an honest way. The current setbacks, in particular with Hungary (blocking to date of roughly €6.35 billion by the Commission), is a reminder of the importance of the matter. This more broadly refers to the EU's difficulty in demanding **compliance with the rule of law, which may become even more acute in an enlarged Europe**. With one of the highest levels of corruption in the world (122nd out of 180, according to Transparency International), Ukraine must continue its huge effort, a pre-requisite to accession to the EU. Such a requirement is also necessary in the Balkans, particularly against organised crime. For countries as fragile as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the challenge for the EU is to consolidate the very existence of a State which is moving towards accession and, across the region, to establish democracy. This forces the EU to bolster its support and oversight instruments, such as the new European Public Prosecutor's office.

It will also be necessary to check that the Accession Treaty for each newcomer will be ratified by every Member State. The EU's integration capacity will really be put to the test in this situation. It will depend on developments to the geopolitical

circumstances that gave rise to these applications and the Europeans' strategic awareness. Although these strategic, institutional, financial and democratic issues are immensely challenging, and the EU may well lose its way with them, it cannot avoid the question of enlargement today. **Russia's invasion and the brutal nature of its hybrid war leave Europeans no other choice than expanding their circle.** Accession not only aims to protect the candidate country from the Russian threat against its democracy. If enlargement puts a stop to Russian expansionism, it also ultimately protects the rest of the EU. This is why countries closer to Russia's borders – Poland and the Baltic States – ardently support the process. France is also becoming a soft advocate of this since the war, placing **enlargement on the pathway to power that Europe must follow to assert itself on the global stage.**

VII • Enlargement and the Wide Europe

For the EU, enlargement therefore represents both a strategic necessity and an immeasurable democratic challenge, for its own institutions and for its candidates. Demanding, necessarily long and uncertain all the way, **enlargement cannot constitute the only response to the new and pressing geopolitical questions that Europeans are facing** beyond the EU. This has become the purpose of the European Political Community (EPC) as President Macron sees it. The EPC was launched in Prague on 6 October 2022, during a summit bringing together forty-four heads of State or government, including from the UK and Turkey. The reason behind this meeting was to discuss the Russian offensive and the goal was to hold talks independently from the enlargement process as such. The EPC is an informal forum for intergovernmental cooperation that focuses on strategic areas such as energy, cyber-security and critical infrastructures. Based on the G20 model adopted at the height of the financial crisis, this new forum must now consider the concrete achievement of the priorities it promotes.

The disparate group of countries it brings together, from Iceland to Azerbaijan, is reminiscent of the Council of Europe with its forty-six members. Yet the unique feature of the new entity in the European institutional landscape is actually this desire to remain informal, without adopting conclusions and leaving room for bilateral meetings. Unlike its initial concept⁵, the EPC no longer appears to be EU-centred. It is not solely geared towards enlargement or even unified by a foundation of democratic values. It is motivated by common interests, the need for strategic dialogue and pan-European cooperation projects. In geopolitical terms, the photograph of the leaders symbolically presented a 'Wide Europe', which goes beyond the opposition between *'the West and the Rest'*, fuelled by the war. The EPC asserts itself without any power outside the continent. Its basic approach is likely to be replicated over the upcoming biennial summits, already scheduled on June 1st 2023 in Moldova, then in Spain and, in 2024, in the UK.

While separate from enlargement, a successful development of the EPC will naturally have an effect on this process. The new Political Community may suffice for States who deem accession too restrictive and fastidious compared to the flexibility, immediacy, equal treatment and practical cooperation that would already be provided by the EPC. For some European States **where nationalism is flourishing, the strictly intergovernmental framework of the EPC may prove to be more appealing than European integration**, then withholding enlargement. It could either form a broader and more fluid circle composed of a Europe of varying degrees, with the broader EU in its centre, or ultimately rival the EU's actual model. It runs the risk of

5 T. Chopin, L. Macek and S. Maillard, "The European Political Community, a new anchoring to the European Union", the Jacques Delors Institute, May 2022, available at: <https://institutdelors.eu>.

becoming an alternative to enlargement, despite the fact that this was not its goal. Another scenario is that a space for political *rapprochement* between EU countries and candidate countries is fostered within the EPC, in line with its very initial purpose.



Enlargement is a standard term, yet it will most likely insufficiently define the upcoming process. While it has until now expanded the EU with each wave of accessions, like an achievement of the European project, enlargement is currently being brought back to the fore against a backdrop of war and major geopolitical tensions which transform the project as well as obliging it to grow. The pace of enlargement to include the Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine is part of the pursuit for European sovereignty, an expression favoured by Macron to sum up the ambitions of integration when faced with the current global upheavals. **It is this “sovereignty agenda”, as much as the enlargement agenda, that forces the EU to reconsider its public policies, its functioning and its funding.**

A Europe enlarged to include thirty-six countries will not be on a one-size fits-all pattern. It will have to maintain the internal market and fundamental rights (European Charter) as the common core that defines the EU, but make room for integration at different paces, as it did for the Euro. On the scale of the continent, the burgeoning EPC offers a forum for strategic dialogue, and even cooperation, in which the EU-27, and later on more Member States, will have to remain united and constitute the driving force.

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