

THE EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY IN THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION: MOVING FORWARD FROM DECLARATIVE PROMISES TO STRATEGIC GOALS?

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Abstract

The EU's enlargement policy has reached the top of the EU's political agenda within today's turbulent geopolitical environment. Experts and academics, however, warn of the lack of clear perspective about its future implementation, so that the mistakes made during the previous enlargement round are not repeated. We aim to contribute to this effort by reconstructing the fundamental logic of the enlargement methodology through its practical manifestation in the EU's official communications on enlargement. We apply a complex quantitative-qualitative analytical methodology to go beyond the official statements in the studied documents and reach a systematic structure of key characteristics. This knowledge will allow for some fundamental changes in the EU approach towards future enlargements, aiming at qualitatively different results in much more successful Europeanisation of the applicant countries.

Keywords: EU enlargement, strategic goals

Introduction

Today's turbulent geopolitical environment has pushed the EU enlargement policy to the top of the EU's political agenda. As a main element of the Union's response towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the process has begun for many countries with lower economic competitiveness, questionable implementation of democratic standards and adherence to the rule of law, and enormous differences in terms of historical evolution, political culture, economic and demographic structure (Börzel 2023; Schimmelfennig 2023a; Schimmelfennig 2023b; Sydow & Kreilinger 2023; Nizhnikau & Moshes 2024). This new in-

secure geopolitical environment has not only created a new momentum for the process, but it has inevitably led to a change in the practical application of the EU enlargement policy.

The upcoming enlargement is being conducted under a renewed methodology which was adopted in 2020 for the countries from the Western Balkan region. The necessity for a new approach back then was justified with the impartial results of the Eastern enlargement¹. This methodology was challenged by the new volatile geopolitical context. Since the applications of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, having in mind the high stakes it is natural that the debate about the future of the EU's enlargement policy became extensive both among experts and in the academic world, resulting in the preparation of numerous policy papers by different think tanks and Commission working groups². There is a shared understanding about the **need to reform the EU enlargement strategy in a way that it becomes capable of producing qualitatively different results**, compared to the Eastern enlargement, in even less favourable conditions. The reform of the EU's enlargement policy, however, must stem from an in-depth well-rounded understanding of the underlying logic behind its present-day implementation. The aim of the article is to contribute to this effort by studying the basic functioning principles of the EU enlargement policy, their transformations over time, and their connection to the concrete results it targets and achieves.

Key characteristics of the EU's enlargement policy

The study of the current developments in the EU's enlargement policy must step upon a solid knowledge of the socio-historical formation of its underlying principles. The need for a dedicated policy on enlargement emerged with the

¹ The argument was cited in a number of internationally influential medias such as: The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/18/eu-refusal-to-open-talks-with-albania-and-north-macedonia-condemned-as-historic-mistake>); European Views (<https://www.european-views.com/2019/10/looking-behind-frances-shameful-veto-on-albania-n-macedonias-eu-accession-talks/>); Reuters (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-balkans/eu-to-overhaul-process-for-admitting-new-members-in-bid-to-lift-french-veto-idUSKBN1ZY198>); Washington Post (https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fpolitics%2f2019%2f11%2f14%2fnorth-macedonia-wont-be-joining-anytime-soon-did-eu-lose-its-peak-leverage%2f); Deutsche Welle (<https://www.dw.com/en/frances-macron-sparks-ire-in-bulgaria-over-migrant-remarks/a-51099238>)

² The following reports are among the most widely discussed: a) 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy; b) Eastern Europe Joins the Western Balkans. A New Start for the EU's Enlargement Policy, ReThink, June 2023; c) Sailing at High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st century. Report of the Franco-German Group on Institutional Reform. Paris-Berlin, September 2023; d) A critical look at the report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU institutional reform. TEPSA Commentary, November 2023; e) Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU, Council of Foreign Relations, November 2023; f) The EU's Geopolitical Enlargement; g) The impact of Ukrainian membership on the EU's institutions and internal balance of power

Eastern enlargement process, because of its unprecedented character. It did not come as a logical spread of the integration process as it is often claimed in the academic literature (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005; Grabbe 2006; Sedelmeier 2011; Gateva 2015). On the contrary, for the Western European countries it presented the only non-military way out of the complex of geopolitical challenges which emerged with the end of the Cold war and the collapse of the communist regimes (O'Brennan 2007; Veleva 2021; Dimitrov 2022). These included, on the one hand, the disbalance created within the European Communities with Germany's unification and its growing power. On the other hand, the instability emanated from the newly established post-communist states threatening with regional conflicts, border disputes and minority issues, ecological crises. Last but not least, Russia's geopolitical and economic interests in the Central and Eastern European region were still not clearly articulated, while its military power and possession of natural resources placed the Western countries in a position of dependence, but to a different degree. This complicated geopolitical situation had only one possible non-military solution – the integration of the CEE countries (Central and Eastern European countries) to the European structures (O'Brennan 2006).

These countries' political, economic and societal models were, however, incompatible with the basic values and norms which define the Western European integration process, and thus, need to undergo major transformations for the sake of their successful integration. The underlying task behind the enlargement process back then was to induce irreversible structural reforms in post-communist countries, supporting their transition to liberal democracy, market economy, and adherence to the principles of the rule of law. These reforms should have made them compatible with the Western European societies, so they could function and develop effectively within the EU.

The novel character of the task was not fully recognised, and the enlargement approach followed a logic of historical continuity. The difficult questions in regard to which countries can be granted access to the EU and upon what conditions became extremely controversial between the member states, especially in the context of the overall uncertainty about the identity and the future direction of the Union. In order to bypass the issues unsolvable between the member states themselves, the process was delegated to the European Commission as the only actor within the EU's institutional structure possessing experience and expertise on preparing countries for accession. This move was an attempt to depoliticise this political matter and present the upcoming enlargement preparation as an administrative procedure. The Commission handled the process with the mechanisms available at its disposal which were, however, designed to solve the different task of the previous enlargement round – market integration of societies with similar political, economic and cultural models. This task requires simply acceptance of the *acquis communautaire* of the Single market. Following this logic of historical continuity, the rule transfer became again the main goal in the Eastern enlargement process, replacing the aims of deep irreversible authentic Europeanising reforms.

The enlargement policy was conducted through the conditionality instrument. It was transformed to address the need for „coercion“ which appeared to address the refusal of some local governments to undertake reforms that would result in their loss of power and resources. This obstacle was unexpected within the logic upon which the enlargement policy was built, and which was reflected in the mainstream academic literature too (Sedelmeier 2012; Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005). Within this approach, the transformative power of the EU through the conditionality instrument was taken for granted, presenting the process as a simple asymmetric relationship between two monolithic subjects in which the weaker party – the CEECs’ governments should be willing to accept the requirements of the stronger one – the EU. Within the framework of this paradigm, the partly unsatisfiable results of the Eastern enlargement process came as a surprise (Sedelmeier 2012; Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005; Smith 2003). Seventeen years after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, however, these major misconceptions must be cleared out. It is thus worth studying the newest developments in the enlargement policy to understand the changes and transformation of its logic of operation. In this way we will be able to assess its current potential to achieve qualitatively different results within today’s even less favourable conditions.

Methodology

The paper builds on the social constructivist paradigm as a productive perspective to studying the subject of EU enlargement. This methodological perspective views the process as a complex interaction between multi-level actors who take part in this interaction through their perceptions, values, beliefs, attitudes, goals. The EU with its complex structure of interests between member states, institutions, businesses, citizens, is represented in this interaction by the European Commission. The clearest expression of the Commission’s initial goals and aims, as well as the methods to achieve them, are the official statements on enlargement. Thus, we will use as an empirical source the Commission’s communication on enlargement from June 2020 (when the new enlargement approach was presented) and from March 2024 (when the latest communication on enlargement was published). The focus of the empirical study will be on the introductory sections of the reports, which in fact contain the definition of the task.

We are conscious of the fact that these documents present only the formal aspect of the collective EU vision and interest in the process, while a whole complex structure of informal interplays remains in the background. However, we will use a specifically designed qualitative-quantitative analytical instrument to study these documents to go beyond the official statements and reach the structure of key characteristics, which will allow us to grasp the mental map of the EU’s enlargement policy in its practical application³.

³ For further details on the methodology, see Popova (2024). The Puzzle of the Bulgarian Integration to the European Union.

In concrete terms, the documents will be broken down into individual semantic accents, which afterwards will be structured back together following not the sequence of the sections but the logic of the research subject itself. First a map of all the actors will be constructed starting with the two collective actors (The European Union and the candidate countries) being placed on top, and then reconstructing in a hierarchical order the full structure of players recognised in the documents. Then all the individual semantic accents will be placed under the actors and sub actors they refer to.

We will analyse the empirical data though the disbalances of the overall structure of actors and semantic accents recognised in the documents. The focus will be places particularly on:

- overall structure/ weight of the main actors;
- definition of the enlargement goal and tasks;
- instrument to achieve the desired results;
- instruments to assess the success of the enlargement policy.

Empirical findings

The empirical analysis shows the following findings:

Firstly, the actors referred to in the two documents are more or less identical, however there are *differences in regard to the intensity* of their presence. In the 2020 document, the main focus is not on a single actor, but on the EU's enlargement policy itself. The variety of individual semantic accents concern the policy both in descriptive terms, referring to the way of functioning of the key mechanisms (e.g. rigorous conditionality; new approach on the rule of law; focus on the fundamentals etc.) and in terms of policy goals (e.g. to build trust among stakeholders; to foster growth; to create jobs). The semantic accents are relatively equally distributed between these two general categories (27:28).

The two actors are represented more or less equally in the 2020 document with 43 semantic accents referring to the EU, the member states, the EU institutions or any sub actors within these structures, and 39 referring to the individual Western Balkan countries; governments; societies; businesses or any other sub actors within them. When it comes to the Western Balkan states, there is a serious share of semantic accents related to the reform goals in the candidate states, such as democratic reforms; rule of law reforms; to accelerate economic growth; to improve the business climate etc.

In the 2024 communication the biggest weight falls on the EU side with 68 semantic accents referring to actors and sub actors in its structure. 59% (or 40 of them) refer to the EU in general terms viewing it as a monolithic subject. It is worth mentioning that a considerable share of these group of accents (15 out of 40, or 38%) refer to an abstract future EU - „the Union of tomorrow“, which

will have „greater influence on the global stage“ and „enhanced resilience“. This is a clear manifestation that over the last 4 years the focus of the enlargement policy has shifted from the candidate countries to the EU itself, while the clarity in the process has decreased leading to the choice of abstract collective descriptions. The candidate and potential candidate countries, although increased in number, compared to 2020, are less represented in the document. In concrete terms, there are 30 semantic accents altogether, that refer to the accession countries in general, Ukraine being the only one named in particular.

Considering the above findings, it does not come as a surprise to find out that there is a shift in the structure of the external actors. In the 2020 document we see a more or less even representation of „third countries“ (6 references) and „Europe“ (5 references). In the first thematic cluster there is no single country being named, rather a general reference to „global tensions“ and „malign third country influence“, while on the „Europe“ side there is a clear similarity in the semantic accents all of them being with positive connotation and referring to either values, or the future outlook of the continent.

In the 2024 document there are again 6 references to „third countries“, however, all of them being concrete and with negative connotations. Russia is clearly named in the communication, and there is a clear reference to „war“, „aggression“, „volatile geopolitical context“. When it comes to the „Europe“ side, again, all the semantic accents are value-based, but this time referring to Europe being „free“, „united“, „a European family“ etc. This reflects a shift in the definition of the task - from mere value-based definition in 2020 to a geopolitical definition in 2024. The geopolitical dimension of the enlargement process has now been explored extensively in the mainstream academic tradition where until recently it was massively neglected (Schimmelfennig 2023a; Schimmelfennig 2023b; Sydow & Kreilinger 2023; Nizhnikau & Moshes 2024).

It is worth pointing out that in the 2020 document we were able to identify a substantial share of semantic accents referring to the goals and objectives of the EU's enlargement policy both on the side EU (21), e.g. to create entrepreneurial opportunities of the green economy, etc. but with an even stronger presence, in the Western Balkan region (25), e.g. „stop the brain-drain from the region“, „boost the economies in the Balkans“, „bring forward the rule of law“. In the 2024 report there are only 5 references to reform goals in the acceding countries, all of them being quite general - „substantial reforms“, „political reforms“, „being ready for membership“ etc. In contrast, there is a higher concentration of semantic accents in terms of the EU goals of the enlargement process (17) such as „to expand democracy“, „to expand external security“, „to anchor stability“. We observe, on the one hand, a changed proportion (from 1,12:1 to 3,4:1), again pointing to the shifted focus from the candidate countries to the EU. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the much-decreased overall number of semantic accents referring to the goals (from 53 to 22, or over 40%), showing again a decrease in the clarity and concreteness of the enlargement policy goals, and in the process in general. However, even in the 2020 documents, the „core

objective“ is **„to prepare the countries to meet all the requirements of membership“**, which sustains through the years.

When it comes to the mechanisms of the enlargement policy, the total number of semantic accents which fall in this category are quite few in total in both cases and have decreased from 9 to 5. The majority of them refer to the „conditionality“ instrument, which seems to occupy an even more central position, compared to the Eastern enlargement. It is defined as the „core“ of the accession process, and there is a promise for „more conditionality“. „rigorous conditionality“, „positive and negative conditionality“.

When it comes to how progress will be measured, we see a tension between two mutually exclusive statements. On the one hand, the process is defined as „merit-based“. In the two documents there is a repeating refrain that each country will be evaluated based on its own merits. In the 2024 communication a new refrain appears, alongside the old one, that no enlargement can take place until the EU is enlargement ready. This is a clear contradiction, making the process even less predictable (in contrast to the stated in the 2020 document aim for „more predictability“ of the future enlargement process), but at the same time keeping open a window for political considerations. Not surprisingly, there is still no explanation as to what „merit“ means in this context, neither what is required to get the EU enlargement ready. The question of a potential institutional reform is being left in the air with just some random ambiguous references to it.

While the question of measuring progress remains quite abstract in the official statements, at the same time we see substantive evidence that in practice it is foreseen to be measured through the well-known principle of „acquis transfer“. Some examples include: „integration will require dynamic alignment to the EU acquis“; „absorption of the EU acquis is facilitated“; „the further integration of candidate countries and potential candidates into respective parts of the Single Market will be underpinned by strengthening regulatory convergence with the EU“ etc. But this was exactly the principle which created some of the major problems of the Eastern enlargement, as it created the conditions for imitating reforms and Europeanization on paper (Dimitrov 2022; Domaradzki 2022; Popova 2024). With this in mind, so far the new approach does not present sufficient evidence for possessing potential to achieve qualitatively different results compared to the previous enlargement round.

Discussion of empirical findings

The empirical results showed, on the one hand, some major changes in the semantic field behind the EU's approach to enlargement. They concern, above all, the perception of the need for enlargement which has now been clearly defined in terms of geopolitics. This shift in the perception leads to a change in the focus - from the enlargement countries to the EU itself. While the Eastern enlargement was presented more as a beneficence to the post-communist countries in response to their aspiration to join, in 2024 enlargement

is already openly stated to be in the interest of the EU. Thus, the main goals are now predominantly EU-focused, with the core objective of the enlargement process being „to get the countries ready for membership“ with view to protecting the functioning of the union itself. This change goes hand in hand with an increased ambiguity and unclarity in the process, opening further the window for geopolitical consideration. The ambiguity comes handy, considering the increased scope, scale, and the complexity of the task, as it serves as a tool to postpone the process until there is a strategy in place. For the sake of its successful implementation, however, this approach needs to be urgently transformed into clear principles and mechanisms, adequate to the changes and transformation that are required in the candidate countries for their effective EU membership.

The documents contain proof for the introduction of some novel principles, showing signs for the learned lessons of the Eastern enlargement. Such an example could be the „fundamentals first“ approach which is a redefinition of the negotiation’s chapters in a way that the chapters concerning matters related to the rule of law and the functioning of the judiciary form a separate cluster which is opened first and closed last in the accession process. Another major change are the principles of „phasing in“ and „gradual integration“ for which we see just a reference in the 2020 document. In the latest communication, however, we see some evidence for their practical implementation in various sections of the Single market. Some examples concern the coordination of economic and social policy under the European Semester which is being replicated in enlargement countries: all candidate countries and potential candidates submit annual Economic Reform Programmes to the European Commission, focusing on reforms to boost competitiveness and improve conditions for inclusive growth and job creation. Other examples are related to cross-border and transnational cooperation programmes, which enable the enlargement countries to work together and with neighbouring EU Member States in key social and economic sectors. The promise for preparation of annual reports on the functioning of the rule of law in the most advanced in the process candidate countries, replicating the reports for the member states, is another example in this direction. If implemented consistently, the gradual integration can make a difference in the accession process. It will mean that the different countries will gain access to exactly these aspects of the membership for which they are most prepared. This could solve one of the biggest problems of the Eastern enlargement, namely, the ideal of the membership as the end goal of the efforts.

These changes in the approach, while promising in some respects, however, still seem to step upon the old principles of the Eastern enlargement process, already proven ineffective – namely, the conditionality instrument and the accession on paper through rule transfer. The main problem with the approach towards the CEEs was that it failed to induce real reforms in the acceding countries, other than the transfer of *acquis communautaire*. This basic political

understanding is replicated in the current approach heading the process towards partial, superficial reforms.

Conclusion

The EU's enlargement policy is still in the process of being built up. Regardless of the claims to put structure in place, it remains a reactive process, dependent above all, on dynamic geopolitics and national political priorities. There are signs for some fundamental changes in the way it is conceived by the dominant actors on the EU side. The basic assumptions behind the EU's enlargement approach towards the CEECs, most of them proven ineffective, however, remain in the core of the EU's enlargement policy today. A new outlook of the old approach in some substantive particulars cannot lead to qualitatively different results. With this in mind, we can conclude that at this stage the EU's enlargement policy does not possess the potential to achieve authentic Europeanisation and lasting reforms in the candidate countries. Considering the recognised political priority and complexity of the enlargement task, it is urgent to change the fundamental logic behind the principles and mechanism of the enlargement approach. They must be focused towards achieving the goals of transformation and irreversible reforms in the acceding countries with a very clear understanding what these imply and how they induce authentic Europeanization.

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