

Geopolitical Change and EU Enlargement: Learning from the Past

What lessons can the EU learn from past enlargement and accession policies?

By Emilija Tudzarovska | December 11, 2023



Summary

The future of the European Union's (EU) enlargement will be shaped both by its ability to learn from history and to adapt to a new political and economic reality in which policymakers and politicians are rediscovering the economy as a battleground for geopolitical competition. The "geopolitical" European Commission is also central to this [new momentum](#). The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 suggested that security has many domestic, social, and economic facets and therefore [cannot be reduced](#) to external and basically military matters. The EU and transatlantic relations, once again, will be shaped by this broader understanding of the concept of security, which brings opportunities and also difficult challenges. In this regard, the liberal international economic order compels a re-examination of past choices and the adoption of new attitudes toward geo-economic relations, as part of a broader security strategy.

Reflections on past experiences will facilitate a better understanding of the contemporary risks to the EU, as well as possibilities for enlargement, its geopolitical ambitions, and its relations with the rest of the world. The war in Ukraine has opened a new perspective on EU enlargement, securing peace in the EU's neighborhood, political and democratic consolidation in the region, and fulfilling moral and normative obligations toward EU candidate states. As a process, enlargement has been stalled for a decade; Croatia was the last member state admitted to the EU in 2013. [The European Council](#) in June 2022 granted Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, while acknowledging Georgia's eligibility for membership and supporting accelerated accession in the western Balkans.

However, bringing enlargement back onto the EU's agenda, this time as a geopolitical imperative, also creates an opportunity for re-inventing transatlantic relations. The EU can learn from past experiences,

including its failure to act collectively and to create an effective multilateral framework for joint European action during the 1990s, especially after the collapse of Yugoslavia. The accession strategies implemented with regard to the western Balkans since the 1990s are instructive to analyze current prospects for EU enlargement. Admitting Ukraine and Moldova will be a challenge, considering the difficulties of democratic consolidation in these states, as well as their exposure to social transformation, different welfare models, and economic instability, on top of internal conflict or war. In a contemporary context, this requires upgrading the collective capacity of the EU to take responsibility towards the citizens living in EU candidate or eligible states, who wait – by belonging – to experience the European community of opportunities, values, choices, perspectives, and social solidarity.

The Historical Context of EU enlargement

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought enlargement back on to the EU's agenda as a [geopolitical imperative](#) and forced the Union to re-examine its [loss of credibility](#) in the case of the western Balkans. The six EU candidate states of southeastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), each have different political, historical, economic, and social dynamics, as well as different cultural and religious characteristics. Yet, the EU has applied the same accession process toward each of the Balkan candidate states, one that has added additional challenges to the states' political, legal and economic transformations.

The never-ending accession policy of these EU candidate states trying to fulfill the [Copenhagen Criteria](#), a set of conditions (Article 49) and principles (Article 6(1)) enumerated in the EU Treaty to which any country wishing to become a member of the EU must conform, provides an important perspective for analyzing the EU enlargement process. The "one size fits all" approach is applied to states with different welfare states' models, political systems, and historical trajectories, who must also engage in a parallel process of building a new type of statehood. In the post-1989 period, this has brought various challenges as these states seek to achieve economic growth, stabilize the institutions, democratize their societies, and thus, to demonstrate the ability to take on the obligations of membership.

This process reflects the difficulties states face in consolidating statehood based on democratic principles and values, within a neoliberal framework that emphasizes global competitiveness, after being exposed to political and social transformation, internal conflicts or war, changes to their welfare models, or economic instability. It also exposes the difficulties for a state to accede to full EU membership, while forming [a new type of a statehood](#) as it changes from a nation-state into an EU member state. This sort of a *limbo-state*, neither nation-state nor member state, is built on normative, legal, political, and economic ties with the EU as part of the accession process, lacks a legitimate position to negotiate with the EU to become a full member state, as it has yet to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria. As a result, this *limbo-state* can be stuck in the process of meeting certain political, legal, and economic demands of the EU, without realistic prospects for membership, while being incapable of returning to a former type of statehood.

This top-down approach has led to a never-ending spiral in which EU candidate states have to address both domestic policy issues and EU-related criteria at the same time. Furthermore, candidate states must also adopt the *acquis communautaire*, or the corpus of EU legislation, legal acts, and court decisions that have constituted European Union law since 1993. National parliaments generally rush to adopt the *acquis communautaire* by using "fast-tracking" procedures, which sometimes create ruptures in political systems with weak checks and balances. This has put the western Balkans and the EU into a

specific type of conundrum of constantly inventing and re-inventing new instruments, strategies, agendas, tools, and means of political and financial support in order to maintain the idea of EU enlargement, but without any real prospects for actual membership.

Within the EU, the European Council has the ultimate power to legitimize any changes to the status of applicant states concerning their EU membership. Because the EU is a union of member states, each state has a seat on the Council and has the power to veto negotiations with candidate states. As such, it is not a surprise that France or the Netherlands, for example, have used this power to block EU enlargement, if the accession of certain candidate states did not fit with the personal understanding of member states' political leaders or their national strategies, or if the leaders find it difficult to [justify any changes to their domestic constituents](#). This exercise of power by the European Council demonstrates the complexity of the institutional design of the EU, in which member states possess a normative right to address concerns of national sovereignty while balancing those of the Union as a whole, all within the context of [democracy-in-the-making](#). As result, this normative power of the EU's member states, exercised through the European Council, makes the EU enlargement process highly unstable.

In his [2017 Sorbonne speech](#) on the future of Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron said of the Union's internal differentiation: "No state must be excluded from the process, but no country must be able to block those wanting to make faster progress or forge further ahead." He then suggested a vision of a Europe of concentric circles, an idea of a "differentiated" accession process as [new kind of enlargement mechanism](#). Yet, Macron put a brake on membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, which Denmark and the Netherlands supported in 2019. Macron argued that his veto supported the "European perspective" of the Balkan countries, at the same time as he underscored that [the "current process" is not credible](#).

Under the pressure of new geopolitical shifts, President Macron initiated a new instrument for dealing with this complex topic. In the spirit of his [managerial approach](#) to mitigating short and long-term risks, Macron launched the European Political Community (EPC) in Prague in 2022. The EPC is designed to create an informal space for non-EU western Balkan and central European states to engage in dialogue with the EU, while they undertake the accession process. As an [informal club for diplomatic discussions](#), [the EPC provides a platform](#) for political leaders to meet and [discuss issues of concern and future prospects for accession](#).

Yet, while the EPC is new, it is not a new idea. Western Balkan states met with leaders of EU member states to discuss prospects for EU accession twenty years ago, at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. Then, as now, there was also a similar enthusiasm for the EU to facilitate the accession of new members as quickly as possible. A recent statement [concerning the case of Ukraine's candidate status](#) echoed the discussions held in Thessaloniki. Once again, the French Secretary of State for European Affairs, Laurence Boone, suggested that [a "differentiated" accession process](#) could quickly "anchor" aspirant countries to the EU. This is in line with President Macron's vision for the EPC. The sustainability of the EPC will however depend on its concrete outcomes, and although it might complement the EU enlargement process in an informal capacity, it does not promise any realistic prospects towards full EU membership for applicant states. Moreover, whether it will simply reiterate old ideas or produce new enlargement strategies remains to be seen.

The wishful aspirations for EU membership, particularly in the western Balkans, also carry the burden of the legacies of war, which took place during and after the collapse of Yugoslavia. The lack of co-

ordination between the EU, in terms of its foreign and security policies, and these states adds to this burden. In the aftermath of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and subsequent state-building processes, the EU fell short. It struggled to identify the challenges of the post-1989 era in former Yugoslavia, including deeply interconnected political, legal, cultural, and historical legacies, amidst great social transformation and a transition towards neoliberal economic policies. As a result, western Balkan states have been stuck in many mutually reinforcing economic and political challenges in order to meet the demands of these changes. Since the 1990s, EU applicant and candidate countries have therefore experienced a variety of distinct challenges. For example, in 2019, North Macedonia and Greece ended a long saga regarding the former's name, which Greece used to block North Macedonia's membership in the EU. This process involved US mediation and resulted in Macedonia's parliament approving a constitutional name change to the Republic of North Macedonia. Ongoing tensions between Belgrade and Pristina in Kosovo, as well as the difficulties Bosnia faces in consolidating its statehood, reflect but two additional challenges to EU accession.

This region, with all its vulnerabilities, became more vulnerable over time to external influences, feeding on the vacuum left by unsolved disputes and limited progress in political and democratic consolidation. This has further fueled the rise of Euroscepticism and nationalism within EU candidate states, in response to the decline of the EU's credibility and the stalled process of enlargement. For example, Republika Srpska's refusal to side with the EU's stance on Ukraine is an example of a state asserting its sovereign prerogatives at the same time as it challenges the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the adoption of which [is part of the accession process](#). These exercises of power will likely arise in the future, especially given how difficult it is for EU leaders to reach common decisions on foreign and defense policy. In this sense, discussions of the EU defense pillar within NATO are inevitable, and yet another challenge for the European leaders in reaching joint agreement on an EU-wide defense and security policy they would like to enforce.

Re-thinking some of the past diplomatic successes of the European External Action Service (EEAS) during the period from 2014 to 2016 can be a useful framework for examining transatlantic relations. Considering contemporary geopolitical shifts and security threats, the US' cooperation with the EEAS in assessing examples of joint cooperation can be a forward-looking approach in addressing security challenges collectively. The diplomatic efforts pushed by the EEAS, which relate to the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#), have built momentum for strengthening the EU's credibility in security and defense. In the same period, the EU bolstered its diplomatic credibility insofar as it facilitated a dialogue that aimed to achieve a comprehensive, legally binding normalization agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. These past examples can serve the purpose of re-thinking the future of transatlantic relations, with the goal of consolidating European credibility in security and defense. Along these lines, the discussion of the role of NATO and its support for the EU can reshape the EU-NATO complementarity in relation to the EU enlargement process itself.

The shifts in global competition, closely linked to geopolitical strategies, are also changing the context for the future progress of EU enlargement. This is different from previous waves of enlargement. Technological competition and the global quest for resources complicate ways of *doing* politics. However, it is also a window of opportunity for improving the coordination over mutually reinforcing policies, such as energy or migration policy. In a twenty-first geopolitical context, in which oil- and gas-producing states exert greater and greater influence, it is important to recognize potential triggers of

political crises in the vulnerable southeastern European neighborhood, [especially in times of high energy prices](#).

Recognizing the ongoing interaction between the geopolitical and monetary domains is [an important perspective](#) for the EU in reshaping its position with regard to the contemporary geopolitical climate and future transatlantic relations. The impact of the geopolitical shift on domestic politics will further interact with the monetary policy, even more so than previously. The EU's position will be also shaped by the domestic politics of the EU Member States.

In terms of enlargement, the biggest task for the EU is to acknowledge and to learn from its previous failures and to understand the enlargement process from the perspective of non-EU citizens. The EU's shortcomings have resulted in lost opportunities for both these citizens and for the EU itself. Both the EU and the EU member state officials have had difficulties in both acknowledging the normative rights of non-EU citizens to decide, question, criticize, or change the political decisions made on their behalf and in attempting to adopt reforms to the accession process. One of the reasons relates to the ongoing trend of the crisis of representative democracies to address the collective interests of citizens. The process of gradual weakening of political representation and social restructuring, starting from 1970s onwards, made governments dependent on the international capital market and less dependent on their citizens. As an outcome of neoliberal political and economic changes, this crisis of representation will be difficult to address at once, or in isolation. For this reason, re-engaging citizens in *doing* politics will be one of the key challenges for modern democratic societies.

In this regard, the EU's [transformative power](#) has played a role in binding candidate states to willingly change their political, legal, and economic systems without their citizens' being able to question the normative chain of accountability, or to learn how to develop a political culture of democratic accountability (account-giving). The EU's progress reports are the main tool for measuring a state's fulfillment of the Copenhagen Criteria; but those have failed to acknowledge the relevance of domestic political factors, especially the role of the political parties and national parliaments, as key actors in decision-making processes. The commitments of applicant states to satisfy the legal criteria for EU membership, by adopting *the acquis communautaire*, as well as to demonstrate a capacity for transition into liberal market democracies with functional market economies, have left their own marks on the political systems of the states. During these *fast-tracking* processes, the MPs of candidate states, as well as these states' executives as main initiators of the laws, have lost sight of both their citizens and their control over the legislation, as if the laws will be implemented on their own.

The result of such an imbalanced way of doing politics, with executives taking a managerial lead specific to the process of Europeanization, is a missed opportunity for building a political culture of accountability, especially in the post-1989 period. This shortcoming is at the core of many ongoing challenges that governments of the western Balkans, and elsewhere, keep facing: corruption, authoritarian-style decision-making, weak checks and balances, questionable rule of law, and a lack of comprehensive macro-economic policies that address the real needs of the citizens and their societies. Great effort will be required for changing the patterns of account-giving, allowing political criticism, and re-introducing the relevance of the internal party democracy as a starting step towards operational democracies. The EU enlargement process will certainly benefit from it.

Policy Recommendations

- *Past lessons from the EU enlargement process must be revisited.* The experiences and knowledge shared by the citizens, historians, practitioners, and others should help *to reconstruct the past and the understand historical narratives of the post-1989 period* in order to tackle the risks to EU security and defense in the future;
- *The EU should continue building awareness for collective decision-making in defense and security issues.* Past examples can serve as a good opportunity for strengthening and examining cooperation with the United States, sharing best practices, creating dialogue for economic and political cooperation, and [supporting EU candidate states in consolidating their statehoods](#).
- *The EU and candidate states should raise a culture of political account-giving, while recognizing political otherness.* The prospects of the EU enlargement must be discussed in national arenas that allow for public scrutiny within both candidate states and member states, and that involve all domestic and EU-wide stakeholders. These collective actions should serve the purpose of *reconnecting with the citizens*.

About the Author

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