



Rethinking Enlargement in times of Geopolitical Earthquakes

Conclusions and recommendations

Jana Juzová

INTRODUCTION

Russia's war in Ukraine prompted a renewed interest in the EU enlargement process among the EU Member States and the topic rose significantly on the agenda. After years of stagnation, new progress has been made by granting the candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June and opening of the accession negotiations with Albania and conditionally with North Macedonia in July. Furthermore, the changed geopolitical situation emphasized the need to integrate more countries in the EU's neighbourhood with the Union, resulting in new initiatives.

Regarding the EU enlargement process, the Czech Republic's Presidency of the Council of the EU started taking the first steps towards enhanced integration of the (potential) candidate countries with the Union, under the provisions of the new enlargement methodology. While more concrete steps are still awaited, a closer dialogue has been launched on topics of mutual interest, such as energy or migration, as the ministers from WB6 were invited to informal EU ministerial meetings. Parallel to the EU enlargement policy, a broader platform for dialogue about European countries' common challenges has been established through the European Political Community, involving not only EU Member States and those aspiring for EU membership but also EEA and Eastern Partnership countries, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

While the interest of the EU in its neighbourhoods seems to be increased, the question is how this momentum can be maintained and whether it will lead to concrete results and changes in the EU's approach to enlargement.

With Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU enlargement process again rose on the agenda. However, **to maintain the momentum in the renewed discussions about faster European integration of like-minded countries, we need to**

bring more energy and unified efforts into the revitalization of the process.

Furthermore, the enlargement process should not progress at the cost of democratization in the candidate countries. The reality is that despite the two decades of the European integration process in the Western Balkans, issues with rule of law and democratic governance still remain. Simultaneously, support for the EU is generally decreasing in the region and other powers are becoming more assertive.

In order to achieve concrete progress in bringing the countries of Western Balkans and Eastern Europe closer to the EU, increased cooperation among the (potential) candidates, pro-enlargement stakeholders and EU Member States as well as civil society and think tanks is crucial.

This is why the organizers of the EU Enlargement Think-tank Forum welcome the increased cooperation with institutes from the regions aspiring for EU membership and other EU countries and the continued dialog and exchange.

Think tanks and CSOs are honest partners in the EU enlargement process, contributing to its increased transparency, enhanced focus on values, and improved communication towards citizens. Similar to the Berlin Process, civil society and think-tank forums should become an integral part of the political process of EU integration.

EU ENLARGEMENT IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

- Enlargement has always been a geopolitical and geostrategic decision and the EU has to approach it as such. Without a credible enlargement policy, the EU cannot fully assume its role as a geopolitical actor. However, Europe needs a **clear vision of the end goal** of the ongoing integration process, **influenced by the discussion about the future enlarging of the EU as well as the newly emerged European Political Community.**
- While **some level of differentiated integration seems to be the only viable option** moving forward, the **EU enlargement process must be grounded in alignment with the European values and fundamental conditions for membership.** It is not in the EU's interest to scale back on the conditionality in regard to rule of law, democratic governance and fundamental freedoms and human rights due to the current geopolitical situation. On the contrary, the **EU needs to invest more in strengthening of democratic institutions and pro-democratic actors within the candidate countries, instead of its current leader-oriented approach.** However, the conditions must be predictable and very well defined, not a moving target difficult for the candidates to reach, as it is the case now.
- In the past years, we have witnessed a growing influence of third actors in the neighbouring regions, using the lack of engagement of the European Union. This increased geopolitical competition has prompted concern within the EU, however, **the Union needs to be much more engaged with the regions preventively,** not only reacting to the problems created by other actors' more proactive approach. The EU has to decide for a **more massive strategic engagement** and investment in the regions – the costs would still be relatively small compared to the benefits for the EU and Member States.

TOWARD PROCESS WHICH DELIVERS

- **Objective and predictable conditionality** materialized in a **truly merit-based process** remains a crucial aspect of the EU enlargement policy. The current frustrations from the stalling process and the lack of alignment with European values and standards are a result of the policy of stabilitocracy at the cost of democratization. We need a system that is consistent in rewarding progress and punishing the lack of it – the revised enlargement methodology puts forward provisions for this approach, but the concrete application is still awaited.
- Currently there is no clear consensus within the EU on the final goal of the enlargement process and the perspective of membership is not credible enough. **For the process to have a chance to deliver results, at least interim goals are needed to maintain some level of credibility.** The concept of gradual integration outlined in the new methodology and developed by think tanks is at the moment the most viable option but still needs to be specified and fully implemented. However, deeper integration on the most urgent issues such as the energy and economic crisis must start now. The EU cannot afford to repeat its mistakes in relation to the Western Balkans from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.
 - Sectoral integration: For Europe to be able to effectively cope with the emerging energy crisis and pursue the **green and digital transitions**, close cooperation with EU's neighbours is crucial. Deeper integration of the candidate countries in the EU's energy, green and digital policies, also in the framework of the Economic Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, should be a priority. However, for effective sectorial integration, the coordination between DG NEAR and other DGs responsible for the relevant policies has to be enhanced. Furthermore, **broader engagement with the**

region through different DGs, EU agencies and various ministries of the EU Member States will significantly contribute to the process of socialization, change of the administrative culture as well as the capacity building process in the candidate countries.

- Institutional integration: The practice of **joint informal ministerial meetings/summits** under the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU should continue and the candidates could be invited as observers to formal Council meetings. Furthermore, the countries aspiring for EU membership should be **included in the European Commission's reporting on EU Member States** (Justice Scoreboard, European Semester, Rule of Law report) as it would contribute to an equal playing field, more objective perception of the countries' situation and progress, and counter existing stereotypes.
- Financial integration: The existing and growing financial gap between EU Member States and Western Balkans cannot be bridged by the IPA III funds, therefore **early access to EU structural funds (for those meeting conditions)** is essential. However, for this access to EU funds, it is important to consider also the **lack of developed internal capacities to administer the funds** in the candidate countries. More focus from the EU's side and individual Member States is needed in order to develop them sufficiently.
- **Communication about enlargement is key**, both among EU Member States in search for consent regarding the future of the Union, from EU representatives towards the candidates about the issues raising mistrust and blocking the process, and from EU Member States governments towards their constituencies about why enlargement is in the EU's interest. The EU representatives should further be more united and honest in their

communication with stakeholders from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe and the public in the region.

- **More exchange between the EU and the candidate countries** is needed. The EU needs to be more present in the candidate countries, not only through the institutions' representatives but also through different sectoral ministries of EU Member States and it has to **engage more in strategic discussions in the countries**. Sceptics of European integration and anti-EU voices are more proactive and vocal – in order to change the narrative, the EU representations, stakeholders in the EU Member States, as well as the civil society, have to be more engaged in promoting how the EU is already supporting the candidate countries and a credible perspective of integration.

This policy brief summarizes the conclusions of the EU Enlargement Think-Tank Forum “Rethinking Enlargement in times of Geopolitical Earthquakes” organized in cooperation with Heinrich Böll Stiftung Prague Office and other partners.



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About the author

Jana is a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Global Europe Programme at EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. She graduated in International Relations from Masaryk University in Brno, and she is currently finishing her Ph.D. studies there. During her studies, she gained experience also at the University of Bologna and the University of Pristina. Her previous working experience involves Central European think tanks and EULEX EU's Rule of Law Mission to Kosovo. She was a Visiting Scholar in the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Brussels and ReThink.CEE Fellow in the German Marshall Fund of the United States. In her research, she focuses primarily on the Western Balkans, EU enlargement policy, Europeanization and democratization, as well as Visegrad cooperation and V4-Western Balkans relations.

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