



COMBINING PRAGMATISM AND VISION – THE FUTURE OF EU ENLARGEMENT

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Enlargement has been an EU success story. At present, there is however much talk that the Union may have reached the limits of its capacity to integrate diversity. Yet there is also a clear understanding that enlargement has not yet been completed. What is lacking, and needs to be included in the current and upcoming enlargements is an optimistic approach, an enthusiasm and a vision regarding the kind of Union an EU 27+ can become. The next troika will have to manage different aspects and expectations of an enlargement process still underway.

PROBLEMS, BOTTLENECKS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

The EU has not yet politically and institutionally digested the 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds. Predominant positions oscillate between concern about the EU's future integration path, reticence towards further enlargement and, at best, a cautious optimism about whether the ratification and implementation of the new Treaty of Lisbon will, gradually, make the EU 27 more efficient and workable and thus able to further enlarge. Fears of potential economic and political consequences of EU "imperial overstretch" are combined with increasing introspection and protectionism against perceived and real insecurities. These factors have led to several problems, bottlenecks and challenges.

First, even though faltering support for enlargement is not simply a matter of inefficient or successful communication, the benefits of enlargement continue to be insufficiently communicated to European public opinion. In spite of numerous information campaigns, misinformation and prejudices concerning the accession of new member states remain to be overcome.

Moreover, Euroscepticism has increased as citizens, and even part of the political elite, doubt whether the enlarged Union will adequately tackle current and future political, economic and social challenges. This issue needs to be addressed in the public arena by mainstream political parties in advance of the June 2009 European Parliament elections, in order to avoid leaving the space free to populist and nationalist demagogues on both the left and the right.

Finally, European political elites have settled into a deadlocked public discourse of enlargement fatigue. Lack of high-level political motivation, especially at the national





levels, to re-introduce a positive and forward-looking perspective for the next enlargements is fossilising into an attitude of immobility.

In addition to challenging circumstances within the EU, conditions inside the Union's (potential) candidate countries have not always been encouraging.

The pace of reforms has in fact been inadequate: in most, if not in all, of the current and potential candidate countries, political and economic reforms have not proceeded as far as they should. Alternatively, it may be argued that they have gone as far as they could, and that in practice this has not been sufficient.

Furthermore, instability persists at the EU's borders: the divided positions over Kosovo, the relative isolation of Serbia and the fragile and dysfunctional structure of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in addition to other economic and socio-political legacies of post-communist and post-conflict transitions, continue to associate Southeast Europe with regional instability. Similarly, Turkey's borders with Syria, Iran, and whatever form Iraq eventually develops into, obliges the EU to play a core role (and a more substantial one than at present) in one of the world's most volatile regions, which neighbours Europe. Lukashenko's regime in Belarus, Ukraine's and Georgia's tense relations with Russia, and Moldova's economic under-development mean that the EU's eastern borders are still a region in deep economic transition and political uncertainty.

Finally, high expectations and transition fatigue in neighbouring countries clash with the inability or unwillingness of EU to enlarge further: the goal post of EU accession appears distant for (potential) candidate countries and therefore lacks the catalytic capacity to push reforms forward, in pace and scope. Furthermore, the perception that the accession process may be largely dependent upon factors that are exogenous to each country's objective progress (i.e., other regional, geo-political considerations) risks delegitimising EU conditionality.

To successfully manage the challenges related to a parallel widening and deepening, it is necessary for the EU to proceed in well-measured, incremental steps as regard the Union's next rounds of enlargement. However, with enlargement stalled, the kind of carrots that the EU can offer is limited and the alternatives it is presenting are uninspiring. The EU has still not successfully developed means to encourage reforms in countries where the prospect of membership is either too distant (eastern European countries) or unlikely (southern Mediterranean neighbours).



RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above, the following recommendations are put forward:

■ Constructive ambiguity concerning EU boundaries: An attempt to define the borders of the EU for once and for all would be politically unwise. The possibility of joining should in principle remain open to all European countries even if the prospect of EU accession in many cases might still be very distant or even indefinite. For most countries in the geographic vicinity of the Union, the prospect of EU membership provides an important impetus for the initiation or continuation of political, economic and social transformation towards democracy and the market economy. To exclude the long-term perspective of enlarging even beyond the Western Balkans would provoke negative reactions and thus limit the potential to bind neighbouring states closer to the Union. The EU would be less able to impose conditionality and would therefore lose much of its capacity to influence the overall political orientation and the transformation process in its European neighbourhood.

■ Revitalise positive attitudes towards enlargement and prepare a Strategic Enlargement Review (SER): during the French, Czech and Swedish EU Presidencies, the Union should lay the grounds for a strategic review of the enlargement process in 2010. By then, the Lisbon Reform Treaty will (hopefully) be ratified and mostly implemented; the new European Parliament will be elected; the new Commission, the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the newly created more permanent President of the European Council will be in office; and the Reflection Group will have presented its final report. This SER must be bold in reiterating that further enlargement is necessary and beneficial and it must be critical in identifying what needs to be done by the EU to prepare for next enlargement rounds. Public opinion surveys consistently register high expectations regarding a global role for the EU. Thus, the key message to be communicated is that a further enlarged Union can have a more powerful, global role on political, economic, military and environmental matters. In preparation for this SER, the European Parliament and the Commission should in particular:

– intensify efforts to communicate the positive aspects of enlargement and where necessary inform about the potential political and economic costs of non-enlargement;

– strengthen initiatives which inform citizens and specifically target schools, trade unions, trade associations, NGOs, and population groups that are traditionally more Eurosceptic or less informed about Europe (such as religious organizations, ethnic organizations, etc.);

– inform EU citizens about the domestic situation in the states aspiring to join the Union. The keys to success are civil society dialogue, cultural links and youth exchange programmes aiming to overcome stereotypes, ignorance and prejudices.



■ No automatic enlargement and no additional (in-)direct accession offers: given the widespread scepticism towards further enlargement in many EU member states, any enlargement automatism should be avoided and further accession offers, for now, should not be directly or indirectly granted beyond the countries that already have the status of candidate country (Croatia, Turkey and FYROM – Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) or potential candidate country (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia including Kosovo). Concerning the progress or the initiation of negotiation talks, the EU needs to stick to its promises but at the same time reassure its citizens that the enlargement criteria are strictly met on the part of the candidate countries. Pressure for reforms needs to be maintained, and progress needs to be critically monitored and rewarded. The EU should avoid defining concrete timetables and specific entry dates to avoid a counter-productive impact on the pace of reforms and the motivation to implement the Union's *acquis* in practice. Finally, other neighbouring countries should be discouraged from applying, in order not to further burden the "waiting room." The prospect of applying in due course should nevertheless be kept open.

■ Exploit cooperation potentials: The EU and the candidate or potential candidate countries should aim at the highest possible level of cross-border and intra-regional cooperation – irrespective of the final result of the accession progress. Intense political, economic, social and cultural interaction as well as cooperation on environmental matters can function as strong motivators in the Union and in the (potential) candidate countries during a long and often cumbersome road to EU accession. Closer relationships improve knowledge of each side about the other, increase the understanding of the problems the other side is facing, reduce the level of mutual distrust, and prepare both sides for the moment when new members actually join the Union. And in case the accession process fails – independent of whether the reasons for the failure originate in the EU or in the neighbouring countries – the establishment of the closest possible ties can function as a safety net. Potential fields of cooperation should in particular include:

– the field of *foreign, security and defence policy* and the area of *Justice and Home Affairs* (including in particular visa questions);

– *economic cooperation* based on concrete transnational and interregional projects in areas which are of interest to both sides, particularly energy and infrastructure;

– the strengthening of *cultural and social ties*, which allow not only the elites but also ordinary and especially young citizens to get acquainted with each other; and

– *education* in order to bring the younger generations closer together, around similar values and the sense of belonging to a wider European community (i.e. through increasing student exchange programmes, school twinning projects, expanding the ERASMUS, SOCRATES and LEONARDO programmes, encouraging more trans-national university degrees, etc).



■ Encourage candidate countries to increase their attractiveness: further EU enlargement will not be driven by a historic momentum like the one that motivated the 2004/07 enlargement after the fall of the iron curtain. Compared to past enlargement rounds, the countries now aspiring to join the Union will have to provide even more convincing arguments that their accession is not only in their own but also in the political and economic interest of the EU and its member states. Accession countries are competing with other enlargement projects both individually and as part of a certain region. This increases the pressure on every applicant to demonstrate a high level of preparedness and willingness to join “the club.” Each country aspiring to join the EU will and should be judged on its own merits. The individual success of internal economic, political and social reforms in the (potential) candidate countries will be the most decisive factor for “persuading” the Union and its member states to enlarge further. The better the political progress concerning the establishment of a stable democracy under the rule of law, the more effective the fight against corruption and organized crime, the more guarantees are given for the protection of human rights and minorities and the resolution of intra- or inter-state conflicts, the higher the chances for joining the EU. On the economic side, the establishment of a functioning and competitive market economy in line with the Union’s *acquis*, with high growth rates and strong inflows of direct investment from foreign and especially EU companies will provide compelling arguments against opponents of further enlargement and secure the support of the business community inside the EU and in the (potential) candidate countries.

■ Internal success – the best argument for further EU enlargement: further enlargement requires that the EU successfully does its own homework and this involves:

– *successful ratification and implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon* : this is a prerequisite for further rounds of enlargement as the new primary law has the potential to enhance the Union’s institutional efficiency and functioning as well as its democratic legitimacy. In case of a ratification failure the EU would slip into a political crisis and further introspection, this time probably worse than the constitutional crisis following the double French and Dutch “no” to the Constitutional Treaty in 2005;

– *modernization of the EU budget*: the Union’s current budgetary structure does not meet the requirements of an EU 27+. To prepare the EU for further rounds of enlargement the member states would have to agree to readjust the budgetary priorities. More funds need to be shifted into more dynamic areas such as innovation policy, internal and external security policy, environment protection and energy policy. One should also reconsider whether the overall size of the EU budget will be sufficient to meet the needs of an EU of 27 and more members;

– *definition of a new narrative based on a new grand project*: the EU has in recent times failed to provide its citizens with a new sense of direction in order to overcome public scepticism concerning the future of European integration. As long as this remains the case, the



necessity of a further enlargement is difficult to convey. Europe needs a convincing and comprehensible answer to a simple question: What do we need the EU for in the future – beyond the valuable achievements of the past 50 years? However, it will not be enough to proclaim this new *raison d'être* in the form of a solemn declaration replete with group photo. Citizens and elites will only find a new interest in the European construction when the EU is able to define a new grand project from which it can derive legitimacy. European policymaking has always been particularly dynamic and successful whenever it set its sights on a large-scale and ambitious goal. The most impressive examples of this have been the single market project, "Europe '92", and the reunification of the continent. The EU and its member states have yet to define an equally ambitious yet realistic and concrete grand project for today's era, beyond a "Europe of small projects". Current enthusiasm and support for the EU's efforts to tackle climate change and to be an innovative, front-runner on environmental issues testifies that Europeans want and expect the EU to "think big" or "think bigger." In short, attitude is key both for the future of the European Union and for the future of EU enlargement.

