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EU enlargement: a new dawn?

After years of stagnation, a new political leadership presents the EU with a unique opportunity to revamp its accession process

After a long twilight sleep, the election of the new European Commission offers a glimmer of hope for the enlargement of the EU in the coming years. The European Parliament, which was elected in the summer, and the new Commission now have the opportunity to actively promote the enlargement of the EU and make up for past mistakes (especially those made by the European Council).

There are clear advantages for both sides in admitting further states from Eastern Europe and the Balkans into the Union. From a security, economic and geopolitical point of view, many arguments speak in favour of an imminent enlargement of the EU. The former states of Yugoslavia and Albania are virtually surrounded by the EU, and three of them are already members of NATO. Ukraine and Moldova border on EU member states and have largely decided in favour of joining. The enlargement talks and the associated harmonisation with the European legal system are also driving social and political change in the candidate countries and thus strengthen democracy and the rule of law in Europe. If the European integration project is not to fail, the enlargement policy must be revitalised and made a real priority.

To expand or to fail

With the election of the Slovenian Marta Kos as Commissioner for Enlargement, the EU Commission is certainly sending out the right message signalling greater credibility and more political responsibility. She is seen as determined and assertive and is backed by the liberal, conservative and social democratic camps — unlike her predecessor Olivér Várhelyi, who quickly lost the trust of the European Parliament and many member states due to favouring Serbia as well as his closeness to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

In the future, Kos' Directorate-General (DG NEAR) will mainly deal

with the 10 candidate countries and no longer, as was previously the case, with the southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy. This provides more clarity in the distribution of tasks within the Commission and gives enlargement policy its central role back. Provided that the necessary financial resources are now also made available for enlargement in the EU's next multiannual financial framework (2028-2034), such a focus will certainly be welcome. The €6 billion 'Growth Plan' for the Western Balkans and the planned €50 billion for the 'Ukraine Facility' aimed at supporting the candidate countries on the long road to the EU should only be a start and will require further financial support. Here, the EU member states have a say in deciding how much the Commission can ultimately support the candidate countries.

In contrast to the European Parliament, the EU capitals have shown themselves to be rather weary of enlargement in the last decade and in some cases also sceptical. When he took office in 2014, then-Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP) even announced that he wanted to 'take a break on enlargement', and French President Emmanuel Macron (Renew) has so far favoured *deepening* rather than *enlarging* the Union and has blocked candidate countries. In 2019, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (EPP) broke the buck by entrusting Hungary with the enlargement portfolio and placing support for democracy and the development of the rule of law in the European neighbourhood in the hands of the very government against which numerous proceedings for violations of the rule of law were already underway.

The long road into the EU

Even if the enlargement of the EU is to remain one of the 'top priorities of the new Commission', as von der Leyen put it at the recent presentation of the reports on the candidate countries, there is still a very long way to go for most of the candidates before they are ready for Brussels.

Although the Commission's analyses, formerly known as progress reports, document the improvements and reform efforts of the candidates, they also highlight the major deficits and partial setbacks of these countries regarding their democratic, constitutional and economic development. The Copenhagen criteria, which require a functioning democratic order and market economy as well as the adoption of all European legal obligations, have been the benchmark for more than 30 years. That said, the 10 current accession candidates are (to varying degrees) far from fulfilling these criteria.

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It is true that European values (Art. 2 TEU) such as democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights are weak in some EU member states. But it is precisely because rule of law standards and democratic practices within EU member states are declining that the bar has been set ever higher for new members and the Copenhagen criteria are now being interpreted more strictly than in previous enlargement rounds. It is therefore no wonder that the last major enlargement round took place 20 years ago and that no other country has joined the EU since Croatia in 2013.

Regrettably, it was not until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that European enlargement policy gained new momentum. After Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia applied for membership, the Balkan states also made progress, and the EU is now in de facto accession talks with six countries.

Even if experience shows that these negotiations will drag on for a long time and the danger of further blockades by individual member states remains, the EU's geopolitical role has been significantly strengthened since the Russian war of aggression. Brussels and the EU capitals are well aware of the urgent and dangerous situation and the 'geostrategists' are wrestling with the 'reformers' over how to simultaneously expand, reform and deepen the EU. The fact that the two must go hand in hand is paramount.

In order to be in a position to admit new states, the EU decision-making processes should be reformed while unanimity in the Council should be gradually converted into majority decisions in as many areas as possible. Germany and Slovenia, among others, are calling for this, particularly in the field of foreign and security policy. In addition, the number of Commissioners and their responsibilities as well as other EU competences such as energy supply and healthcare should be scrutinised.

At the same time, new paths of EU integration should be explored and gradual integration into various European programmes and, above all, the single market should be made accessible even before full membership. It is now up to the EU to bring the numerous ideas of gradual integration to life and implement them consistently. Even if the goal of full EU membership with all rights and obligations must not be lost sight of, phased accession, such as to the euro payments area (SEPA) or the abolition of roaming charges, offers the opportunity for faster

convergence with EU standards and more financial aid, albeit without compromising on democracy and the rule of law.

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A more rapid opening of negotiation chapters would also be advisable, whereby bilateral conflicts between old and future member states should not repeatedly hinder progress on the path to the EU and should be resolved by the European Council. Such instrumentalisation of European enlargement policy must come to an end, preferably by abolishing national vetoes in the individual negotiation phases.

Unanimity in the Council should only be retained for the start and conclusion of accession talks. At the same time, bilateral conflicts between the candidate countries must finally be resolved and relations between Serbia and Kosovo normalised. Without a stronger commitment from the EU member states, this will not succeed — especially if the new Trump administration in the US once again tries to fuel the fire and pull the plans for a territorial swap between Belgrade and Pristina out of the drawer.

Montenegro and Albania, in particular, are currently on a good course, and European social democrats see opportunities for the two countries to join the EU in the coming years. The admission of countries from the Western Balkans would finally fulfil the more than 20-year-old 'promise of the Thessaloniki European Council', which states that the future of the Balkans lies in the EU, and would also send an important signal that EU enlargement is still possible. The progressive forces in the European Parliament and the Commission are therefore called upon to keep enlargement policy on the agenda and not to be dissuaded from fighting for the deepening and enlargement of the EU despite a right-wing slide in the institutions.

In the end, however, it all comes down to the governments and political elites in both the EU member states and the candidate countries. Only if both sides strive for serious reforms and actually implement them will the EU be able to deepen and expand in the coming years. It is time to shake off the slumber and finally tackle the necessary reforms.



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