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Praemonitus praemunitus

In the context of EU enlargement, the Western Balkans have a great deal of experience to offer. What can the new candidates learn from them?

Drawing lessons from the enlargement of the European Union is tricky. The key elements have always been different enough: the geopolitical contexts, the internal challenges of the candidate countries, the EU and its enlargement process itself — making the 'lessons learned' approach often frustrating and misguiding. In spite of all the diversity, reforms and geopolitical turmoil, there are certain elements of the EU enlargement process that remain relevant, instructive and vital. And maybe, just maybe, Ukraine can observe them most clearly in the Western Balkans.

The observations in this article are based on my experience as someone who was directly involved in all the stages of North Macedonia's turbulent EU accession and who is closely following the Western Balkan's integration dynamics. Twenty years after the EU Thessaloniki Summit offered EU membership to the Western Balkans, the results are disappointing: two countries are negotiating without significant success (Serbia and Montenegro), two countries are in the early stages of negotiations (North Macedonia and Albania) and one is a candidate country (Bosnia and Herzegovina). We should therefore be humble and think twice before offering advice to Ukraine.

Still, as Nelson Mandela taught us: 'We never lose. We either win or we learn.' It is safe to say that when it comes to enlargement, the countries of the Western Balkans have learned a lot. Here are some of those lessons we have learned the hard way.

Geopolitical enlargement is back

Even before the horrendous Russian aggression against Ukraine, the EU was reiterating that 'a credible enlargement policy is a geostrategic investment'. Yet, these political messages did not convert into any tangible progress in the Western Balkans until the war in Ukraine broke the inertia and increased the ambition for enlargement, both

geographically and dynamically. A new momentum was confirmed with the decisions to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania (July 2022), Ukraine and Moldova (December 2023) and the candidate status of Bosnia and Herzegovina (December 2022).

Truth be told, geopolitical enlargement is back because it never went away. The European Union itself has been a geopolitical endeavour, born during and as a result of war, and each wave of EU enlargement was geopolitically tied to the need for peace and stability, with the 2004 'Big Bang' accession of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe being the most obvious example.

But geopolitical arguments alone will not be enough. To be successful, EU enlargement must also remain transformational.

Therefore, the assumption that the war in Ukraine would accelerate the enlargement process and create an enlargement appetite among the member states was neither new nor unfounded. Some of the traditional critics of enlargement are evidently concerned about the security of Europe and might withdraw their usual enlargement reserves in times of war, while enlargement supporters gain additional arguments to call for the 'bigger picture' to trump petty interests.

But geopolitical arguments alone will not be enough. To be successful, EU enlargement must also remain transformational. While the European Union needs to address its own enlargement challenges of how to reward progress and sanction regression, the accession countries need to focus seriously on the reform agenda and demonstrate commitment, knowledge and result delivery.

Within the accession countries, the process involves a myriad of different transitions and is fraught with multiple political traps. Liberalising the economy and reforming the regulatory framework while strengthening institutions and fighting corruption sounds complicated enough. Add political pluralism and social divisions, and the mix becomes volatile. Nevertheless, it has to be done, usually while juggling different priorities and conflicting interests.

Technical knowledge and political skills

When North Macedonia started its EU accession process, it was a country recovering from the consequences of the wars in the former Yugoslavia and its own internal ethnic conflict. The EU emphasised peace and stability, which translated into political reforms, minority

rights and decentralised government. Based on their Balkan experience, expectations were running low. Therefore, nobody really welcomed our EU membership application. It took three years of political and organisational commitment, high motivation and teamwork to convince EU officials and technocrats that we were serious and ready. Macedonia was the first of the Western Balkan countries to become an EU candidate solely because we did not 'put all our eggs' in the geopolitical 'basket', but delivered beyond expectations on several reform fronts.

During the two decades of EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, the region has gone through revised methodologies, different regulations, a plethora of acronyms (SAP, HLAD, JHA, CFSP, to name but a few) and endless matrices and templates. Only highly knowledgeable and well-trained experts can navigate these stormy waters. Selecting, training, empowering and retaining the technical experts is the most valuable investment that an acceding country can make.

Macedonia started to invest in its EU experts back in 2003 by dispatching young civil servants to the best European universities for master's degrees in various EU fields and promoting them (upon completion) throughout the public administration. Several generations of well-educated and networked civil servants have practically led the process in its early (very successful) stages, creating an excellent image for the country both at home and among EU partners.

Acceding countries need an honest assessment of the different positions at home and in the European Union: the supporters, the opponents, the bystanders, the undecided.

The enlargement process requires technical knowledge and expertise, but the process itself is hardly technical. It can only succeed if it is driven by strong political will and leadership, creating broad and sustained support. Therefore, respect and support your experts (at home and abroad), trust their advice, make use of their knowledge — but demand leadership and (preferably) consensus from your elected officials. They must be serious, determined and united under the banner of EU membership.

One of the most important skills in politics is the ability to 'scan the room' — if you can't 'read' who your ally or opponent is, you're wasting your time there. The same applies to the enlargement process. Acceding countries need an honest assessment of the different positions at home and in the European Union: the supporters, the opponents, the bystanders, the undecided. Each group merits appropriate attention and engagement. Don't turn your opponents into enemies and don't take supporters for granted.

Most importantly, don't overlook vested interests and don't underestimate the risks of bilateral disputes with EU member states. In most cases, it is better to deal with them as they arise, in order to prevent them from transforming into a veto. Just learn from the trauma of North Macedonia's two vetoes (first by Greece, then by Bulgaria) and don't delay difficult decisions.

It's a marathon

European officials strongly praise Ukrainian endurance and enthusiasm during these turbulent times. They stress the motivation, drive and keen interest of its representatives at the negotiating table. This is indispensable — no major transformation is possible without vast reserves of enthusiasm. However, be wary of high expectations turning into sudden disappointment.

The accession process will be a marathon even in the best-case scenario. Make sure that the country paces itself and plans accordingly. Those who prepare for a sprint will suffer from burnout and may turn from ardent supporters to cynical sceptics. The accession process is not a smooth ride; it has its ebbs and flows, moments of victory and periods of despair. But the acceding countries must stay the course, maintain focus and preserve internal cohesion.

The geopolitical earthquake that shook Ukraine, the EU and the world has created a momentum for the previously lethargic EU enlargement. But this momentum won't last forever. The EU accession countries that are smart, dedicated and take advantage of the 'strategic opening' will become new EU members within the next 10 years. The rest will have to live with the current limbo situation: being next to Europe, but not part of it. Be smart — choose wisely.



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