

The Three Pillars of the EU's New Enlargement Agenda

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25 April 2024

The 2004 'big bang' expansion of the EU was "the best prepared enlargement in the history of the Union". That was the modest opinion of Günter Verheugen, the European Commissioner who oversaw the final years of work of the fifth round of EU enlargement. Preparations started well before his tenure. Conceived at the Madrid European Council in December 1995, 'Agenda 2000' set the direction for reforming the common agricultural policy, (CAP) regional policy, and establish a new financial framework, to make good on the membership prospect given to 10 countries of central and eastern Europe, Malta and Cyprus.

Marking the 20th anniversary of the biggest round of enlargement, the successes of the EU's integration strategy should be celebrated to remind voters in this year's national and EP elections about the transformational power of the EU. The expansion of geopolitical stability on the continent, the democratic consolidation, and the economic catchup have been remarkable, indeed. At the same time, lessons should be learned from the negative experiences to impede future erosions of the rule of law, avert further brain drain, and reform the CAP and cohesion policy more thoroughly.

Having committed itself to another major eastward enlargement, the EU needs a new agenda that squares the geopolitical, governance, and policy challenges that the continent faces. An agenda which finally provides a roadmap for a moribund accession process which was given a new lease on life by Ukraine's membership application four days after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. The design and implementation of that agenda should flow from the European Council's strategic ambitions for 2024-29 and be a priority for the next Commission.

Rather than fitting it for the period leading up to 2030, a timeframe suggested by the European Parliament before it was amplified by European Council President Charles Michel and fleshed out by experts, the 'New Agenda for Enlargement' should cover the period of the next multi-annual financial framework (MFF 2028-34). While setting a target date has the merit of stimulating reforms, most candidate countries nor the EU are likely to be prepared for enlargement in 2030, a date which resonates badly with the failing UN Agenda for Sustainable Development. From conception to delivery, it took nearly a decade for Agenda 2000 to be implemented. The geopolitical, economic and financial situation then was far

more conducive to yielding results than it is now. While tiny Montenegro might be the first candidate through the gate by the end of this decade, thus lending real credibility to the EU's enlargement policy, it is likely to be far ahead of the runner-up in a process which despite its current geopolitical overtones will remain strongly defined by an own merits-based approach.

Ultimately, commitment to the substance is more important than the label. The New Agenda for Enlargement should provide a single framework for the security and statehood of the candidates, the development of the EU and its policies, and a realistic budgetary perspective.

Pillar 1: Credible EU Security Guarantees

While enlargement is not the policy framework in which security guarantees are naturally provided, it is very much contingent on them. With the need to shore up the military resilience of candidates facing increasingly malevolent foreign intrusions comes the need for much stronger support from the EU, which would thereby invest in its own security. This support goes far beyond what the current European Peace Facility and Common Security and Defence Policy offer and ties in with the strategic autonomy debate of the EU itself. Just like the recent upgrade of the mandate of the European Investment Bank to lend to the defence industry was unavoidable, so too are Eurobonds (to ramp up capability development in the EU) and 'boots on the ground' (certainly in non-combat mode) taboos that need to be broken. A Rapid Deployment Capacity should not only be fully operational by 2025, but it should also grow far beyond the anticipated 5,000 troops and meet the targets of the 1999 Helsinki Headline Goal (50-60,000 troops mobilised within 60 days and sustained for a period of min. 1 year) to generate a credible deterrent effect on the part of the EU. Given the political fragility within NATO (cf. a capricious US under Trump and the multi-vector security policy of Erdogan's Turkey), the EU has no other choice but to become a security provider for the continent.

With the collapse of the post-Cold War order and the promise of enlargement, the EU and the candidate countries share a security continuum and (in principle) a vision of the preferred future of the continent. The EU must prioritise dispute resolution of the remaining security and political issues with and among candidate countries. Their resolution would not only enhance the stability of the continent but would also give the EU a strategic and geopolitical advantage. This will primarily require diplomatic heft and money. While it is difficult to foresee that a country at war might join the EU, member states should not allow spoilers like Russia, China and, indeed, Turkey to veto future rounds of enlargement.

The Union should increasingly involve future member states in threat assessment exercises to future-proof planning documents and security and defence toolboxes. In terms of gradual integration of candidate countries into the EU's defence industry, Ukraine is now blazing the trail for the others. This should be the stepping stone to a truly 'European' defence technological and industrial base, and help in speeding up the accession process.

Pillar 2: EU Institutional and Policy Reform

In anticipation of the in-depth policy reviews that President Von der Leyen has promised in her State of the European Union speech last September, the Commission has published an interim communication which skirts around deep-seated problems in order to exude a 'can-do' attitude to preparing the EU for enlargement. See, for instance, the encouraging language about the need for a 'stronger' common agricultural policy, rather than alluding

to the prospect of a painful reform of a policy which accounts for more than a third of the EU's budget. Ahead of the EP elections in the 27 member states, the Commission has not wanted to throw fuel on the fire ignited by farmers who have directed their anger against the imports of Ukrainian agri-food products. This episode has shown the ugly, self-centred limits of solidarity with a war-torn nation.

Another example is the Commission's upbeat message that enlargement can happen by using the full potential offered by the Treaties, which denies the fact that unanimity is required before member states can resort to more efficient governance arrangements (e.g. passerelle clauses); unanimity which will be harder to obtain as new members accede to the Union. This also applies to the enlargement policy itself. The recent German-Slovenian proposal to introduce qualified majority voting (QMV) in the intermediate stages of the accession process needs to be endorsed by all member states to prevent future unilateral hostage-taking.

The New Enlargement Agenda has to tackle all the reforms which are needed to prepare the EU for enlargement with the Western Balkan six and the Eastern trio, not to mention Turkey. Apart from the two big-ticket items mentioned above (CAP reform and moving from unanimity to QMV in the Council), this will require reform of the cohesion policy, which accounts for another third of the EU's multiannual budget. This policy currently operates on agreed criteria but requires a form of budget conditionality like that introduced with the EU's post-pandemic recovery and resilience fund and since replicated in the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans to stimulate the gradual integration of pre-accession states in priority areas of the single market. Tying such budget conditionality to rule of law reforms creates a strong lever in the hands of the Commission to promote progress and should be linked to (improved) rule of law reporting for candidates and EU support through rule of law expert missions. But for the self-styled geopolitical Commission to remain credible vis-à-vis candidate countries, it also needs to be kept to task in playing its role as 'Guardian of the Treaties' towards member states. Credible enforcement of the 'fundamentals' starts at home. Law-abiding member states should not let Article 7 TEU remain a dead letter.

If this seems like an ambitious agenda, then consider that without integrating the single market for energy, finance and telecoms, the EU won't have any economic security in the more volatile world of tomorrow. Yet, as suggested in the Letta Report, integration in these areas would also help unlock more private funding for the EU's political priorities of boosting defence spending, extending membership to candidate countries, and greening the economy.

Pillar 3: Credible Financial Support

There is no doubt that for the EU and the aspirant countries to deliver on the tall order that the New Enlargement Agenda realistically entails, the 27 member states will have to increase their contributions to the MFF. At the most basic level, measured financial support and innovative social policies will have to be adopted for the sustainable development of the poorer, polluted, brain and care drained candidate countries. With the ambition of closing the security and socio-economic gaps between acceding countries and the EU, the inevitability of sizeable envelopes of budget support will have to be accepted. It goes without saying that a much bigger Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA IV) will have to include strong budget conditionality to convince the frugal member states to stick to their end of the 'more for more' principle. The next generation IPA will also have to mainstream the gradual integration methodology pioneered in the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and apply

it to all candidate countries. A commitment will have to be made to strictly apply negative conditionality in cases of backsliding.

No à la Carte Integration

The Strategic Agenda which the European Council plans to unveil in June should revolve around the deeply entwined ambitions of beefing up the EU's defence, economic security, and integration of (South-)East Europe. Taking a leaf out of this strategic document, the Commission President-designate should set the early adoption of the New Enlargement Agenda among their top priorities and reflect this in the proposed composition of the College. Enlargement was never further away than when it was under DG 'Near'. The next Commission should again include a Commissioner for Enlargement. The remnants of the European Neighbourhood Policy (East and South) should be subsumed under DG International Partnerships.

The New Enlargement Agenda will have to be reflected in the design of the next MFF, which provides a more natural timeframe for implementation than 2030. And the Agenda will have to be linked to a further revision of the enlargement methodology. Whereas the Commission rightly says that single market rights and obligations “cannot be à la carte”, it is wrong to structure ‘gradual integration’ of candidates only along sectoral lines. Policy coherence would require the Commission to organise the process in a horizontal manner: with stages grafted onto the formal accession negotiations, plus quantifiable monitoring to justify the release of greater financial, market access and institutional benefits when increasingly higher benchmarks are met – through alignment scores across *all* negotiation chapters, including rule of law and public administration reform. Similarly, the reconstruction of Ukraine should be linked to the formal negotiation process. Treating reconstruction separately and organising gradual integration in policy siloes risk diverting attention away from conducting actual accession talks and decelerating the enlargement momentum needed to meet geopolitical ends.



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