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8 EU enlargement in times of crisis: Strategic enlargement, the conditionality principle and the future of the “Ever-Closer Union”

Abstract: The European Union’s (EU) enlargement policy has been an integral part of its historical development since the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Several enlargement rounds have ensured that the EU has grown to include a majority of the countries of the European continent. Yet, enlargement has never been a straightforward process and has been characterised by compromises, concessions, and strategic considerations. However, recent developments in Hungary and Poland have questioned the ability of the EU to ensure democratic governance amongst its members, and a lack of progress in the integration of the Western Balkan states also questions the EU’s willingness to enlarge any further at this point in time. Enlargement fatigue has been carrying the day since the big bang enlargement and increases the likelihood of mere ‘strategic accession’ in the future. However, the Russian intervention in Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent awarding of candidate status for EU membership for Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 have highlighted the importance of a clear enlargement strategy and membership perspective for EU crisis management in its near neighbourhood.

Keywords: EU enlargement, Western Balkans, conditionality, enlargement fatigue, strategic accession

Introduction

In many respects, enlargement policy is one of the biggest success stories of the European Union (EU). Increasing its membership and integrating new states has enabled the EU to expand its Single Market, so it would become one of the largest common economic spaces in the world. It has also united the European continent, and ensured peace, first in Western Europe by contributing to the reconciliation between (West-) Germany and France, and later by integrating, stabilising, and supporting the young democracies in Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, and Greece), as well as the newly independent and newly democratic countries of the former Warsaw Pact in 2004 and 2007 (and 2013, when Croatia joined to become the then 28th member of the EU). EU integration, therefore, has been about

reconciliation, democratisation, and the creation of a new political union, which provides economic opportunities for its members, as well as a security community, and a union of norms and values (Stahl 1998). As pointed out by Desmond Dinan in his well-known discussion of the history of the EU, enlargement went hand in hand with the ‘deepening’ of the Union – as more members joined, its institutional framework had to adjust and further integration became possible (Dinan 2004). ‘Widening’ and ‘Deepening’ – in other words, together formed the integration process, which included institutional integration and territorial expansion through accession simultaneously.

However, in the post-Cold War period, enlargement has also become a reaction to crises and opportunities. The break-up of the Soviet Union and the opportunities given by the democratization of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) allowed for the EU to engage in the largest expansion in its history in 2004 and 2007 when altogether twelve new Member States joined the Union, followed by Croatia in 2013. This triumphant moment of European unification, which now enabled the EU to cover most of the European continent, expanding its union of peace, democracy, and economic prosperity was seen by many as a unique opportunity to bring Europe’s East and West together on the basis of a common normative and institutional framework (Davies 2007).

Today, however, this period of enlargement is criticised as being rushed, overburdening the EU, and highlighting how different the old EU-15 countries were from the new members that joined after 2000.¹ Indeed, much of the current talk about ‘enlargement fatigue’² goes back to the consequences of the so-called big-bang enlargement of 2004 and 2007, which has left the EU weakened in its institutional capacity on the one side, and produced increased opposition to any future enlargement on the other.

This contribution will look at EU enlargement in its current state. Based on the crises of EU enlargement policy after the 2004 and 2007 rounds of enlargement, we will demonstrate how the current enlargement framework, the Stabilisation and Association Process towards the Western Balkans, is not fit for purpose anymore. There is a deep division amongst EU Member States, with some, such as France pushing for deeper institutional reform (Wunsch 2017), including addressing the

1 As examples for this kind of criticism it is worth mentioning that former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced immediately when coming into office in 2014, that there would be no further enlargement in the near future. The sentiment was shared by other members of the European Commission. See for example: Alexe 2014.

2 Enlargement fatigue is an analytical term which denotes a widespread feeling of discontent with the policy outcomes of enlargement. It leads to a lack of political will to support and push for further enlargement.

problems of democracy and the rule of law amongst EU Members before any future enlargement can be considered. Others, such as Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia continue to support and push for further enlargement towards the countries of the former Yugoslavia. This internal conflict has had a profound impact not only on the half-hearted commitments of EU officials towards future enlargement (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017), but also on the candidate and potential candidate countries in the former Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and most recently Ukraine and Moldova, are candidate countries, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidate countries). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent awarding of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova has deepened both the internal divisions amongst EU Member States and the crises of EU enlargement, the future of which has become ever-more uncertain, particularly towards the Western Balkans.

This contribution will tackle the issue in three sections. In the first section, we discuss the framework of EU enlargement policy historically and how it has changed after the end of the Cold War. In the second section, we look at the Stabilisation and Association Framework for the Western Balkans to discuss how it was designed as a specific response to the crisis linked to the break-up of Yugoslavia. Finally, the third section looks at the increasing narrative around ‘enlargement fatigue’ on the one side and the revival of the ‘Strategic Enlargement’ narrative in the wake of Russia’s intervention in Ukraine on the other. By doing so, it discusses how this newly-found focus on enlargement does not mean that the EU has overcome its enlargement fatigue, nor that the deep crisis of the EU in terms of engaging with countries in its near neighbourhood is over.

EU enlargement and the symbiosis of widening and deepening

EU enlargement has been an integral part of the overall integration process of the Union since its foundation in 1957. It is no wonder that the Treaty of Rome already provided for expansion and a process for the integration of additional Member States – what started with six countries at the beginning was therefore always designed to grow and enlarge over time. Of course, this commitment to the evolution of what is today the European Union goes back to the very foundational ideas of Jean Monnet, who famously declared that

The contribution which an organized and living Europe can bring to civilization is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations. [...] Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto

solidarity [...] With this aim in view, the French Government proposes that action be taken immediately on one limited but decisive point. It proposes that Franco-German production of coal and steel as a whole be placed under a common High Authority, within the framework of an organization open to the participation of the other countries of Europe (Schuman Declaration 9th May 1950).

As this excerpt from the Schuman Declaration highlights, the EU was born out of crisis (i. e. the Second World War and the destruction it caused), it was designed to overcome the generation-long conflict between Germany and France (Smeekens and Keil 2022), and it was designed to be open for others to join. Enlargement, therefore, was already foreseen before even the first Treaty for the European Economic Community had been signed. Over time, the European Community's (EC, and after 1993 EU) ability to use enlargement as a tool to overcome other crises became ever more important. In the 1970s, Ireland, the UK, and Denmark joined the EC, partly as a response of these countries to the effects of ongoing global economic crises. When Greece (prematurely) joined the EC in 1981 and Portugal and Spain in 1986, enlargement was proposed as a tool to support the democratization of these countries that had only recently transformed from dictatorships. Enlargement, at this point, became a tool to support regime change toward liberal democracy, in addition to expanding the internal market of the Union (Juncos & Perez-Solorzano Borragan 2018).

As the EU expanded, it also reformed. The unity of 'widening' – i. e. expanding the Union – and 'deepening' it by reforming its institutional architecture towards more democratic decision-making and strengthening supranational institutions should not be neglected in the process of integration (Jachtenfuchs 2005). Even the Treaty on European Union (1993 – sometimes also referred to as Maastricht Treaty) was designed to prepare the EU for the membership of Austria, Finland, and Sweden, which joined in 1995, and to pave the way for the Union to play a bigger role in a post-Cold War era, hence the focus on a new foreign and security policy. When the big-bang enlargement of 2004 and 2007 occurred, the EU had undergone numerous further reforms through treaty revisions (Treaty of Amsterdam, 1999, Treaty of Nice 2003), and the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 was also designed to make the Union more efficient and ensure its ability to function with soon-to-be 28 Member States (by then, the accession of Croatia was already agreed, though a date was not yet set). However, Eastern enlargement proved to be a much more challenging task than foreseen by many, and in hindsight, it is often seen as the moment when EU absorption capacity reached its limits, and countries such as Romania and Bulgaria were accepted without necessarily fulfilling all the membership requirements properly (Icener & Phinnemore 2015). What many characterised as a complex process of Europeanisation, namely the transformation

of previously Communist, one-party regimes into multiparty democracies, that would embrace liberal market economies, has been an initial success, but over time became much more contested and not fully sustainable in numerous new Member States (Zhelyazkova et.al 2019).

EU enlargement, as a result, became a much more contested issue. This was not just the case because of the growing recognition that the political transformation in Central and Eastern European countries was not as linear and as sustainable as previously predicted. But it was also a direct consequence of growing economic imbalances in the newly enlarged Union – new Member States were mainly economically weak and saw EU integration as a way to get access to substantial Regional Development Funds. At the same time, there was also a growing economic imbalance within older Member States – of course, most visible in Germany where the much poorer East joined West Germany, but also observable in growing economic inequalities in the UK (for example between London and the Southeast, and the rest of the country), in France (where areas in Northern France were economically left behind by Paris and the South) and Italy (where there was a growing diversity between the North and the South). This stronger focus on economic development, social welfare policies, and their link to overall institutional reforms would become an important feature for any further discussions on enlargement rounds (Bartlett 2008).

The completion of the big-bang enlargement rounds of 2004 and 2007 collided with another important development in the EU: The financial and economic crisis that followed shortly afterward shook the Union to its core. Particularly the financial crisis in Greece and several other European countries threatened to not only end the currency union and the achievements of monetary integration, but they re-opened old conflict lines between different Member States. Germany and France focused on stronger reforms and fiscal discipline, while other countries such as Spain, Portugal, and Italy initially highlighted the need to respond more directly with state interventions and additional spending to the crisis. In the end, the EU saw a substantial amount of integration, through the Banking Union, the new powers of the European Central Bank, and the ability of the European Commission to oversee Member States' budgets, investment, and economic development plans (Violi 2021). However, the economic crisis also had several repercussions for the EU's enlargement policy. First, it ensured that enlargement was taken off the agenda as a priority. In the EU, the years after 2009 were mainly focused on dealing with the economic and political fallout from the financial crisis, while the 2015 migration crisis already loomed on the horizon. Enlargement, therefore, was taken off the agenda for EU leaders. Second, fiscal and economic stability became key ingredients in the discussion on enlargement. Countries such as Germany but also Sweden, which have previously strongly supported enlargement, now requested

that any new members would be able to economically contribute and be able to cope with any major crisis (Töglhofer & Adebahr 2017). Third, the need for further internal reforms became obvious. France became a champion of those voices that asked for a delay of any future enlargement until further internal reforms had improved the functioning and crisis resilience of the Union. However, the countries of the Western Balkans, which were affected by the different crises as well, remained engaged in the enlargement process, whilst actual membership became ever-more difficult to achieve.

EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans

The EU's engagement in the Western Balkans begins as a story of failure. While the EU had economic and political ties to Socialist Yugoslavia, it was unable to provide an economic and political alternative to the growing nationalist rhetoric and political conflicts within Yugoslavia and therefore, prevent the violent dissolution of the state in the early 1990s (Keil & Stahl 2015). This was particularly problematic, as the EU had become the main negotiator during the Yugoslav crisis (Silber and Little, 1996). In 1991, when it became obvious that the Yugoslav state was dissolving and Slovenia and Croatia were preparing for independence, the Chairman of the European Council of Ministers Jacques Poos famously stated 'This is the hour of Europe, not the hour of the Americans' – highlighting the EU's commitment to dealing with the evolving crisis (Glaurdic 2011). However, the EU's diplomacy and conflict resolution mechanisms failed to prevent and later end the violence in the region. The EU was seen as neither able nor willing to enforce its ultimatums and underline its policy proposals with hard power (Holbrooke 1999; Glenny 1996; Baker 2015).

The war in Croatia and later in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) ended because the US administration under the leadership of President Bill Clinton eventually shifted its focus and became more involved. The Dayton Peace Conference and the subsequent Peace Accords enforced Pax Americana and thereby secured the dominance of the US as the sole superpower in the post-Cold War period (Daalder 2000). The EU had to rethink its foreign policy approach and overall structures. As Ana Juncos (2013) has demonstrated, what followed after 1995 was the evolution of important foreign and security mechanisms in the EU, as well as a new framework for engagement with the Western Balkan countries. The "Return to Europe" discourse played a major role at the time, as the EU was not only preparing for enlargement towards the former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe but the expansion towards the post-Yugoslav states was seen as an important element of the wider unification of the European continent.

The war in Kosovo heavily influenced the evolving relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans. This is for three reasons. First, the involvement of NATO and the US demonstrated an important lesson learned for the EU in its engagement in the region – any political and diplomatic efforts to uphold international law needed to be backed by a credible threat to use force if necessary. Second, the Kosovo war finalised the link between European and Atlantic integration and involvement in the region – NATO and the US would become the main security providers (as was the case after 1995 in Bosnia), while the EU would become the main driver for political and economic reforms – i.e. democratisation and state-building in the countries. Third, the war in Kosovo shifted discourses in the EU; it became obvious that a simple application of previous enlargement frameworks, including the policies used in Central and Eastern Europe, would not be enough to deal with the post-Yugoslav states. As a consequence, the EU Head of States and Governments extended the ‘great promise’ of membership at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit to South Eastern Europe (SEE):

The EU reiterates its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. The future of the Balkans is within the European Union. The ongoing enlargement and the signing of the Treaty of Athens in April 2003 inspire and encourage the countries of the Western Balkans to follow the same successful path. Preparation for integration into European structures and ultimate membership into the European Union, through adoption of European standards, is now the big challenge ahead [...] The speed of movement ahead lies in the hands of the countries of the region. The countries of the region fully share the objectives of economic and political union and look forward to joining an EU that is stronger in the pursuit of its essential objectives and more present in the world (European Commission 2003).

Categorizing all post-Yugoslav countries as future EU Member States and the EU’s commitment to their integration also followed important democratic changes in Serbia and Croatia in 2000, as well as more active engagement of the EU in Bosnia. Indeed, the EU became heavily involved in state-building, the promotion of power-sharing arrangements, and substantial reform efforts in a variety of countries in the former Yugoslavia (Cooley 2019). The EU’s approach fundamentally shifted, enlargement became about more than membership preparation adopting EU law, it became linked to wider state-building and democratisation as well as security sector reform, refugee return, economic recovery after conflict, and extensive EU presence in countries that were severely affected by the conflicts between 1991 and 2000 (Keil 2013; Belloni 2020). At the same time, elites in the Western Balkans clearly committed to EU and NATO membership (with the exception of Serbia, which did not commit to membership in NATO) (Keil & Stahl 2015). As Rupnik (2011) has argued, this was another moment for the “Hour of Europe” in the region – a new commitment to political, social, and economic integration, that linked Eu-

ropean integration of the region with a commitment to overcoming the results of the conflicts of the 1990s and early 2000s as well as committing to extensive European-driven state-building in countries such as Bosnia, Kosovo and North Macedonia (Keil & Arkan 2015).

The EU's enlargement framework towards the Western Balkans

The EU's enlargement policy is distinctly different from traditional foreign policy, as it aims to turn 'foreign policy' into 'domestic affairs' through the process of enlargement – aimed at the eventual accession of the candidate country. Hence, the EU expanded its policy portfolio for the Western Balkans to adapt to the challenges of the region, including conflict legacies, weak states, and ongoing neighbourly tensions. At times there were three EU Special Representatives (for Bosnia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo), a police mission in Bosnia (EUPM), an ongoing military mission in Bosnia (EUFOR), as well as a previous military mission in Macedonia, and the EU's largest civilian mission, the ongoing EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), which first launched in 2008. The EU's engagement in the region expanded further after 2009 when the Treaty of Lisbon strengthened the EU's foreign policy capabilities and the newly created European External Action Service took over many of the representations of the EU in the region.

The EU's enlargement policy, like its foreign policy more generally, is characterized by different frameworks, actors, and priorities, which are shifting over time. The framework for enlargement has evolved throughout the years from a more ad hoc approach for the first rounds of enlargement in the 1970s to a more complex and coordinated approach after the Treaty of Maastricht and the evolving enlargement framework in the context of the Copenhagen criteria for membership in the EU. The Copenhagen criteria define what conditions future member states of the EU must meet before they will be able to join. These are:

- political criteria: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities;
- economic criteria: a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces;
- administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the *acquis* and ability to take on the obligations of membership.

For the Western Balkans, the EU developed additional tools after 1999 in the Stabilization and Association Process as a result of a new Enlargement Strategy. This is defined by the EU as:

The Stabilisation and Association Process is the European Union's policy towards the Western Balkans, established with the aim of eventual EU membership. Western Balkan countries are involved in a progressive partnership with a view of stabilising the region and establishing a free-trade area. The SAP sets out common political and economic goals although progress evaluation is based on countries' own merits. The SAP was launched in June 1999 and strengthened at the Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003 taking over elements of the accession process. (European Commission 2016).

The SAP builds on the EU's previous experience with enlargement and combines two main elements – stabilisation through engagement on the one side, and enlargement through economic and political reforms ensuring deeper integration on the other (Keil 2013). The new focus on post-conflict reconstruction and state-building has meant that the EU became much more active and directly involved in the Western Balkan countries. The current enlargement framework links financial incentives, trade preferences, and closer political cooperation with conditionality around the EU's own legal framework (the *acquis communautaire*), as well as additional conditionality in the areas of regional reconciliation, rule of law implementation and the commitment to international law and justice (Gordon 2009). The EU's motivation for enlargement is therefore also clearly articulated in the SAP – it links its own desire for a safe and secure neighbourhood with its foreign policy focus on stabilisation and regional integration in the post-Yugoslav states (Keil & Stahl 2022b).

The SAP treats each country in the region differently, and progress has been mixed. While Croatia was able to join in July 2013, Serbia and Montenegro are currently candidate countries negotiating their membership with the EU. North Macedonia and Albania are also candidate countries and have recently been given the green light for membership negotiations, although no official start for negotiations has been determined (as of November 2022). Bosnia became an official candidate for EU membership in 2022, while Kosovo remains a potential candidate. Both countries have signed a Stabilisation- and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU, which formally binds them to the current enlargement framework.

The EU's Stabilisation and Association framework was initially seen as a useful policy guide to engage with a region that was characterised by state weakness and violent conflict in the 1990s. The combination of stabilising fragile states (and democracies) and integrating them into the EU was seen as the solution to the ongoing tensions and conflicts in the region. Yet, after 2009 more criticism of the Union's approach emerged as the EU's enlargement framework was contradicted

by the policies of individual EU Member States (Dzankic et. al. 2019). The negotiations on the future of Kosovo in 2007 already demonstrated a split among EU Member States, and the complex accession of Croatia in 2013 as well as ongoing negotiations since then have demonstrated that the EU, despite its detailed enlargement framework, is often unable to speak with one voice. European policy in the post-Yugoslav states has instead been characterised by internal divisions and the Europeanisation of bilateral problems. Greece's name dispute with Macedonia, which hindered the country's progress towards EU membership after 2013, as well as Croatia's current unwillingness to support any further progress for Serbia due to historical tensions, and the fact that five EU member states have not recognized Kosovo's independence are all examples for the divisions within the EU over its approach in the region (Keil & Arkan 2015b, Blockmans 2007). The different interests of EU member states (both the large and influential ones such as Germany and France, which focus more strongly on EU internal reform, as well as smaller ones like Croatia and Slovenia, which continue to support further enlargement as it is in their geopolitical interests) are additionally problematic because they allow different elites in the post-Yugoslav states to exploit European disunity. For example, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has been criticized by the European Parliament for his authoritarian style of government but has consistently received support from certain EU member states, mainly from the Visegrad countries, who have celebrated him as a committed and strong leader with a pro-EU discourse. In addition, actors such as Russia have become major players in some countries in the region, exploiting European disunity and the lack of progress for their own interests (Bechev 2020).

Enlargement fatigue and a new focus on strategic accession?

The developments away from democratic governance within the region, a series of internal crises within the EU, and a shifting geopolitical framework in Southeastern Europe all explain the crisis of EU enlargement and growing enlargement fatigue. This enlargement fatigue is a more recent phenomenon of European integration literature and denotes an analytical term for the observation that a feeling of frustration with the process and the result of enlargement becomes more and more widespread. As an analytical observation, it could only appear some years after the Big Bang 2004 when the biggest enlargement ever was prestigiously celebrated on the lawns of Dublin castle. What is more, on the iconic media event of the Thessaloniki summit one year before, the European Union had promised the

remaining Western Balkan states that they are entitled to join the club – the concrete accession date being only a matter of timing. Yet, after these huge political successes, a certain uneasiness crept into the process since the Croatian accession turned out to be rocky while burdened with the war criminal affair of Ante Gotovina and border issues with Slovenia. Furthermore, Romania and Bulgaria, not part of the Big Bang due to domestic reform problems, demanded favorable treatment and succeeded in getting a definite entry date (2007) without having accomplished the *acquis communautaire*. It was in the 2010s then when the progress reports of the European Commission increasingly revealed stagnation and even backlashes of democratic reforms in the Union's newest member states (Wunsch and Olszewska 2022). Further accessions looked so unlikely and far away that the formerly powerful job of the EU Commissioner for Enlargement was merged with responsibilities for the EU's neighbourhood policies. The portfolios were merged – despite the fact that the EU has always been stressing the strict co-existence of two separate political instruments of the EU's external relations.³

In the following, we will sketch an analytical model of enlargement fatigue which makes a social-constructivist argument fed with liberal elements. Interestingly, while enlargement fatigue is widely used as a descriptive term in the academic literature, it has so far not been properly conceptualised within a political science framework (see for example Economides 2020, O'Brennan 2014). Enlargement fatigue is understood here as a widespread feeling of discontent with the policy outcomes of the enlargement process. Reference point is the three-level ontology of enlargement which consists of the people in the Western Balkan states (level 1), the governments and their supporting elites in the Western Balkan states (level 2), and the Brussels actors – the Commission, Parliament, and EU Member States (level 3). In an ideal world, Brussels supports the Western Balkan governments in adopting the Copenhagen criteria while the governments transform the political systems to become liberal democracies. As a consequence, compliance with the criteria becomes credible and sustainable. The populations in the Western Balkans engage in a more and more lively civil society, make use of their participation chances, and vote for reformist pro-EU, liberal political parties. In this ideal type world, enlargement fatigue has hardly any place. The win-win-win game would only produce winners since the people can already reap the benefits of the ongoing process, be it cheap credit, selective access to the internal market, and visa liber-

³ Even on the website of DG NEAR – as it is called now (standing for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations), these two are strictly linked. See further: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/index_en

alizations. Now, how does enlargement fatigue come into play, and how does it link to the perception of crisis?

First, there is a natural delay factor based on the steadily growing gap between the increasing *acquis communautaire* on the one hand and the condition of weak states' bureaucracies on the other. When the first Northern enlargement occurred, there were only four years between the announcement and the actual accession (1969–1973). Before the Big Bang, the gap widened to around 10 years. For the Western Balkan states, 20 years already looked like wishful thinking. One could reasonably argue that extensive time frames over 20 years irritate the calculation of entire age cohorts in the Western Balkans societies since they would not be able to make EU accession a part of their personal career. Frustration comes as a natural consequence, and this has consequences in the attitudes towards the EU, the willingness to accept EU-oriented reforms, and in the electoral behavior of citizens of the Western Balkan countries.

Second, the role of governments in the Western Balkans and their supporting elites deserve attention. As Vachudová (2005: 15–16) has pointed out, in many East European countries post-Soviet elites carried the day after 1991 which show no intrinsic motivation for reforming their societies. Instead, they are interested in staying in power and pursuing their own interests, including access to financial and human resources for their benefit. Nationalist and partly anti-Western rhetoric divert from their political deeds putting the blame on Brussels, Berlin, or Paris for their alleged arbitrary acts and hypocrisy. By doing so, they inhibit idealist-minded and pro-European contenders in the domestic realm, while feeding the historical victimization discourse of the populations. Their nationalist rhetoric is often mixed with clear practices of state capture and authoritarian governance (Bieber 2020, Keil and Perry 2018). Vis-à-vis Brussels, though, they play a double game employing doublespeak: They pretend their pro-European attitudes, point to the rigour and depth of their reformative agenda, applaud the help from Brussels and demand more. Gergana Noutcheva (2012) uses the term “fake compliance” to describe this behavior – pretending to implement key reforms towards the EU while avoiding a commitment to fundamental change that would threaten the position of these elites at home. In these cases, the EU is often seen from two perspectives. On the one side, Brussels, Washington, and other external forces are often blamed for internal developments, conspiracies, and for political interference (Blanus et al 2021), while on the other side, the EU is seen as an important source of financial revenues and as a paymaster (Bretherton & Vogler 2006: 20), providing additional rents for their entourage and their cronies. The idealist implications of EU integration – democracy, peace, reconciliation, permanent conflict management, care for European common values – do not bother them much: They are the promoters and profiteers of enlargement fatigue. The crisis of EU enlargement is

therefore also a crisis of governance in the Western Balkans – the lack of commitment by the EU to integrate these countries in a reasonable timeframe has enabled authoritarian elites to capture these states and use EU integration for their own purposes (Bieber 2018)

Third, the Brussels actors experience a growing unease as far as the validity and purpose of the Western Balkans enlargement are concerned. Here, enlargement fatigue means frustration with the stagnation of political processes in the region, be it democratic reforms, compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, or regional conflict resolution. Hence, since democratization takes so long and the region may degenerate into turmoil, democracy and stability may look like a trade-off: The EU, such a reading goes, must choose between unstable democratic regimes and stable undemocratic ones: the latter, “stabilocracy” has become the buzzword in the Brussels sphere. One more threat adds to this rationale. The “weakening pull of integration” triggers inference from outside. Regional and great powers beyond the West (Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf states) feel tempted to exploit the alleged emerging “power vacuum” in the Western Balkans (Keil & Stahl 2022, Bieber & Tzifakis 2020). They come up with political and economic incentives and motivate the Western Balkan governments for cooperation. In the eyes of EU elites, these incentives may go beyond usual cooperation for everyone’s benefit. Rather, they are apt to deepen the autocratic tendencies in the region, weaken the “transformative power” (Grabbe 2006) of the EU and further dilute peace-building efforts.

Overall, these trends on all three levels contribute to the abandoning of the core principle of enlargement, the conditionality principle: It was meant to make the acceding states similar to the EU i.e.. “Europeanise” them. “Europeanise” means a “*process of constriction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms*” (Radaelli 2003: 10). Recalling the EU relations with Serbia one has to acknowledge on the one hand to what extent the conditionality principle has been overburdened. It was used to hunt war criminals, bargain on Kosovo, and support seemingly pro-European politicians in election campaigns (Mladenov & Stahl 2015). On the other hand, the conditionality principle was extended and flanked considering the launch of an additional instrument for the Western Balkans before the candidate status within the Stabilisation and Association Process. Yet all of this, as outlined above, takes time and de facto increases the delay factor. This is why the EU now tends to dilute conditionality and sacrifice it for short-term stability gains pleasing Western Balkan population claims and signaling progress to EU publics. By doing so, the overall enlargement turns to “strategic accession” (Stahl 2013). This is a historical pattern of the enlargement process which made countries accede to the EU without having incorporated the *acquis* and without

having accepted the ideals of European integration (democracy, peace and reconciliation, solidarity). As a quick look at the historical patterns of such strategic accessions already reveals, the policy outcomes may be problematic and sometimes disastrous. The partial idealisation of Denmark's membership in the EC as part of the expansion in the 1970s led to the invention of treaty opt-outs in the 1990s as part of the Maastricht Treaty to accommodate growing Euroscepticism in Denmark, while the normative glorification of British membership in the 1970s resulted in consistent conflicts between the UK and other Member States, as well as finally resulting in Brexit. Greece's non-compliance with the *acquis* at least contributed to its de-facto bankruptcy causing the most severe integration crisis in 2010, when the common currency union around the Euro was close to collapsing and failing (Pisani-Ferry 2011). Cyprus' accession despite territorial non-saturation led to diplomatic clashes with Turkey and the latter's turn away from Europe. Romania's and Bulgaria's premature entry motivates ongoing surveillance of the Commission regarding their defects in democratization.

Despite ongoing enlargement fatigue in many European Member States, a new turn to 'Strategic Enlargement' emerged in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While there is no genuine willingness amongst EU Members to enlarge and adopt, not least a country the size of Ukraine, the new geopolitical reality, and the EU's commitment to supporting Ukraine in light of the aggression, resulted in the EU awarding Ukraine the status as a candidate country. Hence, the EU declared Ukraine and Moldova candidates of the Union despite the fact that it had refused to do so in peaceful times and had oftentimes criticised the deplorable state of democratic reforms in both countries. Suffice it to say that candidacy status was most evidently granted for geopolitical, strategic reasons, and with no real intention to integrate the countries any time soon. This hypocrisy will trigger negative effects on the Western Balkans since the turn to strategic accessions taught the regional governments how to proceed: when the security situation deteriorates, the EU will be forced to grant new rewards (Stahl 2011). Moreover, countries such as North Macedonia and Albania that have been waiting for membership talks for several years now, and Bosnia, which had its application for candidate status rejected in 2019, will wonder how Ukraine and Moldova, without any progress in political and economic reforms, have now levelled up with them in terms of EU progress (or in Kosovo's case, even overtaken it). In the end, the conditionality principle runs the risk of being reversed and thus "perverted" (*ibid.*): Only if the EU delivers new incentives will the Western Balkans remain on the European track. Yet some EU actors will not be willing to import further instability and autocratic structures via enlargement in the EU. This tension between strict conditionality and strategic accession will accompany future political debates on Western Balkan enlargement.

Conclusion

EU enlargement is a story of success for a long time, but it is, as highlighted, also a story of crisis. A story of an external crisis that the EU reacted to, be it economic such as in the case of the UK and Ireland; democracy support as was the case in Spain, Portugal, and Greece or geopolitical as occurred with the “Big Bang” enlargement in 2004 and 2007. The most recent crises during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s and the current war in Ukraine highlight how the EU enlargement framework has adapted over time to accommodate the challenges that these new potential EU Member States pose.

Whilst these adaptation capabilities of the EU and its institutions should be recognised, it is also important to highlight that in recent years, the “Widening” and “Deepening” of the Union have both failed to substantially progress and the EU, as it is at the moment, is not ready to accommodate its current members and deal with challenges from within, including the serious threats to democracy and the rule of law in Member States such as Poland and Hungary (Bogdanowicz in Chapter 5; Bernhard 2021). Increasing Member State disunity over the progress of integration both through internal reform and external accession has also paralysed the Union in recent years. There is general agreement amongst the academic community and policymakers alike that the current enlargement framework through the Stabilisation and Association Process is not working anymore, however, a credible alternative that can bridge the divides within the EU has so far not emerged. Instead, the war in Ukraine, the deteriorating political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and increased tensions between Serbia and Kosovo have all resulted in increased calls for strategic accession, less focused on the EU as a Union of norms and values such as human rights and democracy, and more centred around the idea that the EU needs to compete with other global powers in an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment. What this will mean for the actual process of enlargement remains to be seen, but it can easily be foreseen that it will have severe consequences for the EU as a Union as well as for its candidate countries.

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