

18

Enlargement

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Reader's Guide

The process of enlargement has transformed the European Union. It has had far-reaching implications for the shape and definition of Europe, and for the institutional set-up and the major policies of the Union. This has been accomplished through a number of enlargement rounds, which Section 18.2 analyses in detail. This is followed by a review of the enlargement process itself, with a focus on the use of conditionality and the role of the main actors involved. The contributions of neo-functionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism to explaining the EU's geographical expansion are evaluated in the third section of the chapter. The success and prospect of future enlargement are discussed in the context of wider EU developments, especially the effect of the external crises and increasing geopolitical competition, 'enlargement fatigue', the domestic context in the candidate countries, and Brexit.

18.1 Introduction

Membership of the European Union has increased over time from the **original six** to the current 27 (after Brexit). Through a series of enlargement rounds, the territory of the Union has been expanded to stretch from the Mediterranean shores to the Baltic Sea, and from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, in just over four decades. The **accession** of new member states to the EU is generally considered a success of **European integration**, because it has proven to promote stability across the continent, while the willingness of countries to join the EU remains undeterred despite the often cumbersome processes attached to adapting to the Union's accession requirements and despite the challenging times resulting from the eurozone and migration crises, Brexit, and more recently, the **COVID-19** pandemic (see Chapters 25, 26, 27, and 28).

EU enlargement is best understood as both a process and a policy. As a process, it involves the gradual and incremental adaptation undertaken by countries wishing to join the EU to meet its membership criteria. This process became more complicated after the end of the Cold War, when the Union had to respond to the accession applications of the newly democratizing countries from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). With time, the EU's membership requirements have been expanded, and the number and diversity of countries wanting to join the Union have increased, thus the EU has adapted its decision-making, policies, and institutional set-up to an ever-increasing and diverse membership. As a policy, enlargement refers to the principles, goals, and instruments defined by the EU with the aim of incorporating new member states. It is a typically intergovernmental policy under which member states retain the monopoly over decision-making, and the Commission plays a **delegated** role monitoring the suitability of countries to join and acting as a key point of contact during the accession negotiations. The European Parliament (EP) must approve the accession of new members through the **consent** procedure.

The accession of new member states poses interesting and challenging questions, such as why do countries want to join the EU? How and why does the EU support the accession of new member states? How has EU enlargement developed over time? How can European integration theories explain enlargement? And what is the future of enlargement? This chapter will address each of these questions in turn. The first part

of the chapter briefly traces the evolution of enlargement from the first round of accession in 1973 to the latest round in 2013. The second section outlines the process of enlargement from a country's application for membership to accession, and the policy instruments devised by the EU to support applicant countries in their endeavours. The ability of **integration theory** to explain the EU's geographical expansion is evaluated in Section 18.3. The future of enlargement is assessed in the context of wider developments both within and beyond the European Union. The chapter closes with a brief conclusion.

18.2 The history of enlargement

The European Union has been involved in five rounds of accession adding 22 members to the original six (although the UK left in 2020) and bringing the Union's overall population to 448 million people. These rounds tend to group countries under geographical labels—namely, the 'Northern enlargement', the 'Mediterranean enlargement', the 'EFTA enlargement' (referring to Austria, Finland, and Sweden's membership of the European Free Trade Area), the 'Eastern enlargement', and 'the Balkan enlargement' (see Table 18.1). Each round of enlargement faced the European Community (and later the Union) and the new member states with different sets of challenges;

Table 18.1 Enlargement rounds

Enlargement round	Member states acceding	Accession date
Northern enlargement	Denmark, Ireland, UK	1973
Mediterranean enlargement	Greece Portugal, Spain	1981 1986
EFTA enlargement	Austria, Finland, Sweden	1995
Eastern enlargement	Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia Bulgaria, Romania	2004 2007
Balkan enlargement	Croatia	2013

each was informed by different sets of political and economic interests, and had diverse effects on both the EU and its members. It is widely agreed that the Eastern enlargement brought about the most extensive change for all parties concerned. What follows is a brief review of each enlargement round, explaining key challenges and patterns.

The 1973 Northern enlargement featured the accession to the then **European Economic Community (EEC)** of Denmark, Ireland, and the UK. Norway had also applied for membership in April 1962, but accession was rejected in a 1972 referendum. The negotiations between the EEC and the applicant countries were characterized by two French vetoes to the accession of the UK, which affected the destiny of the other two countries. This first enlargement illustrated a characteristic that would define subsequent accession rounds—namely, the asymmetrical relationship between the EU and the applicant country, which places the latter in a weaker position, meaning that it has to adapt to the accession requirements or risk the negative effect of exclusion. It also illustrated how an enlarging membership brings about more diverse

national preferences. The accession of two more Eurosceptic member states, the UK and Denmark, challenged the typically pro-integration approach of the original six. The UK's political significance unsettled the bargaining influence of the **Franco-German** axis until the country's departure in 2020. The institutionalization of the **European Council** in 1974 was, to a large extent, the pragmatic Franco-German response to this challenge (see Chapter 11).

The Mediterranean enlargement took place in two stages: Greece joined in 1981, and Portugal and Spain in 1986. Turkey had also applied in 1959, but negotiations were suspended in light of the military intervention in 1970 (see Box 18.1). This round of enlargement was characterized by the political and symbolic significance that membership had for three countries that had just completed transitions to democracy. Accession to an organization that required a commitment to democracy was regarded as a guarantee for democratic consolidation. For Spain, it also signified a return to Europe after Franco's self-imposed isolation. This enlargement round also featured an asymmetric relationship between candidates and the Union, and



BOX 18.1 CASE STUDY: THE ACCESSION OF TURKEY TO THE EU

Turkey is the longest-standing EU candidate. An Association Agreement was signed in 1964 and a Customs Union established in 1996. Turkey's membership application was filed in 1987, but the Commission did not recommend the opening of accession negotiations at that point. It was not until 1999 that Turkey was granted candidate status, with formal accession negotiations opening in October 2005. However, since then, not much progress has been achieved: out of 35, only 16 negotiating chapters have been opened, and one chapter has been provisionally closed. There are a number of reasons for this lack of progress. First, increasing geopolitical tensions between Turkey and EU member states in the Eastern Mediterranean, including issues such as the Cyprus conflict, maritime disputes between Turkey and Greece, the involvement of Turkey in regional conflicts (Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh), and competition over the exploitation of gas resources. In July 2019 the EU's Foreign Affairs Council agreed to adopt sanctions against Turkey because of its refusal to stop gas drilling activities off the coast of Cyprus. Second, there are serious concerns about the state of democracy in Turkey, due to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's authoritarian style. For instance, the clampdown on human rights, the rule of law, opposition parties, and media freedom after the attempted

coup in July 2016; constitutional changes that further centralize powers in the office of the President; and Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, a treaty on preventing and combating violence against women, in 2021, have been met by condemnation across the EU. The European Parliament called for a suspension of Turkey's membership negotiations in July 2017. Third, increasing support for populist parties in European elections on a typically anti-migration and anti-Muslim ticket challenge the accession of a new member state with a predominantly Muslim population and which is geopolitically placed at the forefront of a migration crisis that the EU has been unable to solve. This largely explains why the controversial 2016 EU–Turkey Statement (better known as the EU–Turkey refugee deal) was arrived at outside the accession negotiation framework. Fourth, Turkey's sheer size (more than 79 million inhabitants), its poverty (GDP per capita about a quarter of the EU average), and its contested European credentials also raise concerns that will have to be assuaged before an accession treaty is agreed. Finally, the EU's own absorption capacity, enlargement fatigue, increasing opposition to Turkey's membership across the EU, member states' domestic preferences, the EU's travails post-Brexit and post-COVID-19 pandemic will also shape any further progress.

the shifting in bargaining coalitions between member states, which explains the introduction of the **Single European Act (SEA)** and **qualified majority voting (QMV)** in the EU Council (see Chapters 2 and 11). The main effect of the Mediterranean enlargement was economic. Greece, Portugal, and Spain were not **net contributors** to the EU Budget, but rather required financial support to rebuild their lagging economies. The EU's **cohesion** policy was the EU's response to this challenge (see Chapter 21).

The 1995 EFTA enlargement saw the accession of Austria, Finland, and Sweden to the EU. Norway also negotiated accession, but EU membership was rejected again in a 1994 referendum. This was the least controversial round of enlargement because the three countries were wealthy established democracies that became net contributors to the EU Budget. For the EU, the accession of three new member states affected the formation of coalitions in the EU Council, with the clear emergence of a Nordic pro-environmental block that supported the entrepreneurial role of the Commission in strengthening the EU's environmental policy.

The Eastern enlargement took place in two stages: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined the EU in 2004; and Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. This round of enlargement was the most complex for the EU. The Union had to respond to the effect of the collapse of communism, the eagerness of the newly established democracies to 'return to Europe', and the new security concerns posed by the end of the Cold War. The symbolic dimension of EU membership was heightened in the early 1990s, as the Union regarded enlargement as a tool with which to implement its commitment to democracy and stability promotion to the east of its borders. This symbolism derived from a 'rhetorical entrapment' which prevented member states from either openly opposing or threatening to veto enlargement without damaging their credibility (Schimmelfennig, 2001; and see Section 18.4.3, 'Social Constructivism'). This, however, did not diminish the strong asymmetrical **power** relationship between the EU and the candidates. The EU was prompted to set up a comprehensive list of accession requirements, the so-called '**Copenhagen criteria**' (see Box 18.3), and a better-defined staging of the process of accession, as well as a toolkit of policy instruments to support the extensive domestic reforms requested from the **candidate countries** in

preparation for EU membership. The sheer number and variety of potential new member states, combined with their economic underdevelopment, presented the EU with the challenge of institutional and policy reform to ensure its own readiness for a larger membership. This often-difficult reform was initiated at the 1996 **intergovernmental conference (IGC)** and its effects were still felt during the negotiations leading up to the **Lisbon Treaty ratification** in 2009 (see Chapters 2 and 3). The member states had to agree a new weighting of votes in the EU Council under an extended QMV and a new distribution of seats in the EP, as well as a reform of the size of the Commission. Strict transitional arrangements were negotiated, particularly on the free movement of people, direct payments to farmers, and restrictions to agricultural exports from the new member states. While these are clear evidence of the candidate countries' weak position, they are also evidence of the very diverging preferences that individual member states had about the Eastern enlargement (see Section 18.4.2, 'Liberal intergovernmentalism'). Suffice to say that while security and economic benefits were obvious to countries such as Germany or the UK, and a sincere Baltic identity explained Danish, Swedish, and Finnish support, countries such as Spain and Portugal feared the shift of EU financial support to help struggling economies in the east. Moreover, the accession of Cyprus was a particularly sensitive issue. The EU faced the additional challenge of importing into its borders the unresolved conflict between the Greek Cypriot community in the south of the island and the Turkish occupied territory in the north; while Turkey had finally been awarded candidate country status in 1999 (see Box 18.1).

The Balkan enlargement started in 2013 when Croatia joined the EU. By 2017, negotiations were ongoing with Montenegro and Serbia and in 2020 the EU Council agreed to start accession negotiations with Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia. This round of enlargement is different from the others in three respects. First, the Western Balkans is a more unstable region as democratic governance is still challenged by years of ethnic conflict and political polarization, and corruption and organized crime are still rife. Second, the EU is being challenged on different fronts by the aftermath of the economic crisis, the rise of **Eurosceptic** populist parties, the refugee crisis, Brexit, and a difficult coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges, coupled with an 'enlargement fatigue', that is a less enthusiastic

narrative around the desirability of future enlargements and the EU's capacity to accommodate a larger and more diverse membership, explain the hesitant support for more EU territorial expansion. Third, the experience of the previous enlargement rounds clearly informs how the EU manages further expansion. Therefore, the EU has become more cautious to the point that EU enlargement is no longer a priority. And as a process, enlargement has become more asymmetrical, more politicized, more technical, and more focused on the monitoring of compliance with EU requirements.

KEY POINTS

- Through successive enlargements, the EU has expanded its membership from the original six to 27.
- Each enlargement round has been characterized by an asymmetrical relationship between member states and the countries wishing to join, the internal adaptation of the EU to cope with a larger membership, and differing national preferences among member states.
- The Eastern enlargement has been the most challenging of all enlargements to date.
- Turkish EU membership is controversial and it is unlikely that the country will join the EU in the near future.
- The Balkan enlargement is shaped by the impact of the previous enlargements, the crises affecting the EU, and the challenging circumstances in the region.

18.3 Enlargement: the process and actors

Although the main actors have remained the same, the process through which a country becomes a member of the EU has become more complex over time. This section provides an overview of the changes to the process of accession, the key principles and provisions guiding enlargement, the role of the different actors involved (member states, candidate countries, the Commission, and the European Parliament), and the main stages in the process. Originally, Article 237 of the Rome Treaty required the applicant country only be a 'European state'. For example, Morocco applied for EU membership in 1987, but its application was turned down because it was not considered to be a European country. By contrast, Turkey, which had applied for membership in the same year as Morocco,

was officially recognized as a candidate country by the Helsinki European Council in December 1999, despite the fact that Turkey's European identity had been questioned by some member states (see Box 18.1). Before the Eastern enlargement, the enlargement procedure was also simpler: the application was dealt with by the EU Council after receiving an opinion from the Commission and subject to the approval of the member states. But this does not mean that the process was less politicized. For example, French President Charles de Gaulle vetoed the British membership application in 1963 and 1967 because of fears that the UK would undermine the EC; the UK would join the EC only in 1973 after the French veto was lifted. Also, despite the Commission's negative *avis* (opinion), the member states decided to start accession negotiations with Greece, with the country joining the EU in 1981. Hence, from the beginning, enlargement has been an intergovernmental policy, in the hands of the member states (see Box 18.2).

Conditionality, that is, the requirement that candidates must comply with EU conditions to progress in the accession process, has been the key principle driving enlargement. The use of political conditionality and the subsequent establishment of a complex monitoring procedure by the Commission were only



BOX 18.2 BACKGROUND: ACCESSION PROCESS FOR A NEW MEMBER STATE

According to Article 49 TEU:

'Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union. The European Parliament and national Parliaments shall be notified of this application. The applicant State shall address its application to the Council, which shall act unanimously after consulting the Commission and after receiving the consent of the European Parliament, which shall act by a majority of its component members. The conditions of eligibility agreed upon by the European Council shall be taken into account.'

'The conditions of admission and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the Union is founded, which such admission entails, shall be the subject of an agreement between the Member States and the applicant State. This agreement shall be submitted for ratification by all the contracting States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements.'

Source: Treaty on the European Union, © European Union.

BOX 18.3 BACKGROUND: THE COPENHAGEN CRITERIA

To join the European Union, a candidate country must have achieved:

- stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities;
- the existence of a functioning market economy, as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union; and

- the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union.

At the 1993 Madrid European Council, an additional administrative criterion was introduced: that the candidate country must have created the conditions for its integration through the adjustment of its administrative structures.

introduced with the Eastern enlargement round in the early 1990s. The 1993 Copenhagen European Council adopted a set of political and economic conditions with which countries willing to become EU members had to comply (see Box 18.3). According to the so-called 'Copenhagen criteria', applicant countries must have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the protection of minorities; a functioning market economy capable of coping with the competitive pressures and market forces within the Union; and the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and **monetary union**, and adopt the *acquis communautaire*. The establishment of clear membership conditions satisfied both pro- and anti-enlargement camps. On the one hand, it reassured reluctant member states such as France by increasing the hurdle for enlargement since applicant countries would be admitted to the EU only once these conditions had been met. On the other hand, those in favour of enlargement, such as the UK and Germany, saw the adoption of the Copenhagen criteria as a way to provide some certainty about the process, reducing—although not eliminating—the possibilities for politically motivated decisions (Menon and Sedelmeier, 2010: 84–6).

The identification of this set of criteria led to the establishment of a complex monitoring mechanism currently managed by the Commission's European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Directorate-General (DG NEAR), which acts as a 'gatekeeper', deciding when countries have fulfilled these criteria and whether they are ready to move to the next stage (Grabbe, 2001: 1020). This monitoring process takes place following the **benchmarks** set by the Commission in different documents—in the case

of the Western Balkans, the **stabilization and association agreements (SAAs)** and the **European partnership agreements (EPAs)**; and the **Europe agreements** in the case of the Eastern enlargement. Compliance is also monitored in the regular annual reports produced by the Commission. This monitoring means that the enlargement process follows a merit-based approach (Vachudova, 2005: 112–13), yet political considerations have also played a part in this process.

Linked to the use of conditionality is the principle of **differentiation** and a preference for bilateralism in the EU's relations with candidate countries. During the Eastern enlargement, a regional approach was rejected in favour of a meritocratic approach according to which each country would proceed towards membership on its own merits and at its own speed. The expectation was that this method would spur the adoption of reforms in the candidate countries. The downside was that it could lead to a **multi-speed** process, with some countries being left behind. For example, the decision made at the Luxembourg Council in December 1997 to start negotiations with a selected group of applicant countries (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia) raised fears among those left out (Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, and Bulgaria). For this reason, accession negotiations were opened with the remaining Central and Eastern European (CEE) applicant countries (in addition to Malta) at the Helsinki European Council in December 1999 and efforts were made to include as many countries as possible in the 'big bang' enlargement of 1 May 2004, which saw the accession of ten new member states (see Table 18.2). Romania and Bulgaria were not deemed ready to join the EU yet. At the 2002 Copenhagen European Council, it was agreed that these two countries could join

Table 18.2 Applications for EU membership (since 1987)

Applicant country	Date of application	Date of accession
Turkey	14 April 1987	—
Austria	17 July 1989	1 January 1995
Cyprus	3 July 1990	1 May 2004
Malta	16 July 1990	1 May 2004
Sweden	1 July 1991	1 January 1995
Finland	18 March 1992	1 January 1995
Switzerland	26 May 1992	—
Norway	25 November 1992	—
Hungary	31 March 1994	1 May 2004
Poland	5 April 1994	1 May 2004
Romania	22 June 1995	1 January 2007
Slovakia	27 June 1995	1 May 2004
Latvia	13 October 1995	1 May 2004
Estonia	24 November 1995	1 May 2004
Lithuania	8 December 1995	1 May 2004
Bulgaria	14 December 1995	1 January 2007
Czech Republic	17 January 1996	1 May 2004
Slovenia	10 June 1996	1 May 2004
Croatia	21 February 2003	1 July 2013
North Macedonia	22 March 2004	—
Montenegro	15 December 2008	—
Albania	28 April 2009	—
Iceland	17 July 2009	(Iceland withdrew candidacy in 2015)
Serbia	22 December 2009	—
Bosnia and Herzegovina	15 February 2016	—

in 2007 provided that they had met the membership criteria. On 1 January 2007, Bulgaria and Romania became EU members despite evidence that they had not fully met their obligations, in particular in the area of

BOX 18.4 DEBATE: ENLARGEMENT, STATE-BUILDING, AND PEACE-BUILDING IN THE BALKANS

The power of attraction of EU membership has been hailed as one of the most powerful tools of EU foreign policy. Enlargement is said to have extended peace and security to other areas of the continent through the democratization processes fostered by the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. EU enlargement is thus seen as a peace-building project. However, despite significant financial and technical assistance and wide domestic support for EU accession, progress towards membership in the Balkans has remained limited. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this state of affairs can be explained as a result of a number of contradictions that have undermined the EU's member state-building strategy (Juncos, 2012). First, the EU's strategy has been perceived as an attempt to impose particular reforms externally—that is, a reform 'from above'. Despite a commitment to promote 'local ownership', in practice this has hardly implied an involvement of civil society and the domestic public, undermining the legitimacy of the enlargement process. Moreover, the EU has continued to portray the reforms as mere technical changes despite the highly politicized nature of state-building and peace-building. EU reforms promote specific models of political and economic re-organization. This 'technocratic approach' has only served to increase distrust and conflict among the ethnic parties. Furthermore, while all nationalist parties still support the wider goal of European integration, they have increasingly redefined the project to suit their political goals. Overall, the EU needs to recognize that the main problems in Bosnia are linked to unresolved statehood issues which are intrinsically political. Until this is acknowledged by the EU, sustainable progress towards accession will remain fragile.

rule of law (including judicial reform, corruption, and organized crime). A special 'cooperation and verification mechanism' was thus established by the Commission to monitor progress in these areas and to help the countries to address the outstanding shortcomings.

Conditionality has also been actively used in the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans as a means to stabilize the region (see Box 18.4). This new phase in the EU's intervention also sought to restore the Union's reputation after its failure to stop the war in the former Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s (see Chapter 19). The prospect of future membership for the Western Balkans was first brought to the table during the Kosovo crisis, and led to the establishment of

the Stability Pact and the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). The membership perspective for the Western Balkans was reconfirmed by the European Council in Feira in 2000 and in Thessaloniki in June 2003. Since then, most Western Balkan countries have applied for membership; North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Albania have been given candidate status (see Table 18.2).

The Commission and the Council have repeatedly reminded applicant countries of the meritocratic nature of the process: 'Each country's progress towards the European Union must be based on individual merits and rigorous conditionality, guiding the necessary political and economic reforms' (Presidency of the EU, 2009). However, some candidate and potential candidate countries expressed their disappointment with what seemed like privileged treatment for Iceland, whose membership application was referred to the Commission by the Council in a matter of days. By contrast, Montenegro's application was referred only after five months and Albania's application took even longer. In the case of North Macedonia in 2009, although the Commission has repeatedly recommended the opening of accession negotiations, the European Council has delayed the process due to the name dispute with Greece, and more recently, a language dispute with Bulgaria. As Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004: 664) put it, the effectiveness of EU conditionality depends on the 'credibility of the threats and rewards'. Further, the authors argue that 'a lack of credibility has undermined the effectiveness of pre-accession conditionality in SEE and of post-accession sanctions against democratic backsliding in CEE' (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2020: 816). The perceived domestic politicization of enlargement in the member states sends the wrong message to the applicant countries, which are also concerned about high adoption costs, and weakens the Commission's emphasis on a transparent and a merit-based process.

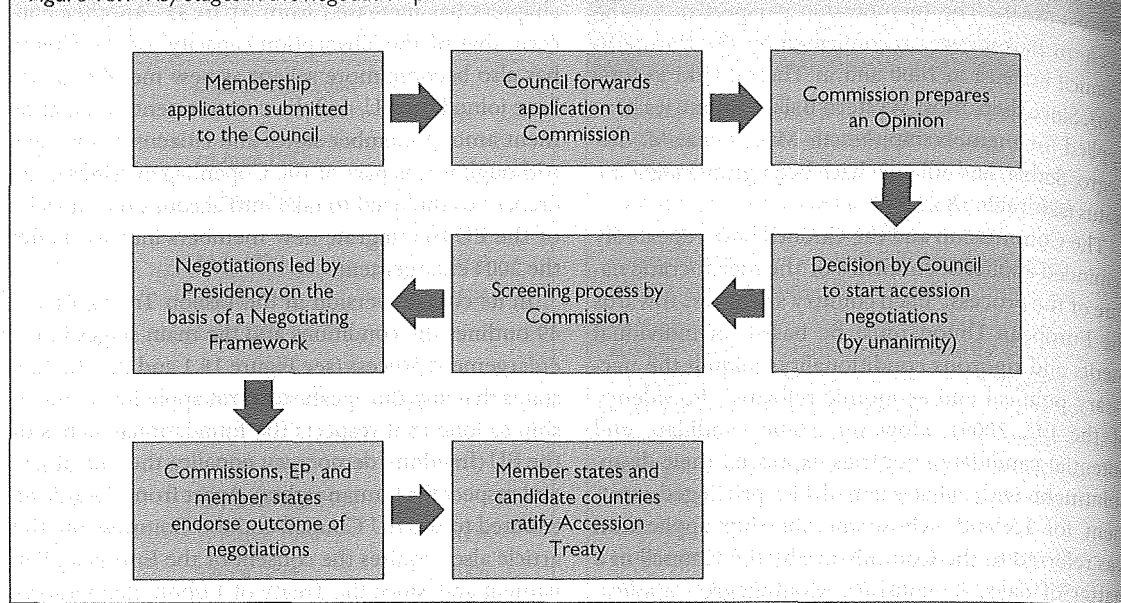
The lessons learnt from the 2004 enlargement, and, in particular, problems with the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania, have led to a stricter application of conditionality by the EU. For example, the 'new approach' to enlargement pays more attention to issues related to the rule of law, so the rule of law chapters are opened first in the negotiation process. The hurdles for accession have also been raised because new legislation has

been added to the *acquis*. As a result, the number of chapters has increased from 31 to 35. Another concern, that of the 'absorption capacity' of the Union, has also become more salient as new member states have joined the EU, and the commitment for enlargement among member states and citizens has waned. Although it was part of the Copenhagen criteria, references to the need to take into account the capacity of the EU to integrate new members increased after the 2004 enlargement.

In its current version in the Lisbon Treaty, Article 49 outlines the conditions and the main stages in the enlargement process (see Figure 18.1 and Box 18.2). It states that any European state can apply for membership as long as it respects the foundational values of the EU (freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights). Apart from the role attributed to the EU Council and the Commission, this article also requires the consent of the European Parliament and, since the Treaty of Lisbon, that national parliaments be informed of membership applications. Once an application for membership is successful, the Commission is invited to prepare an opinion (*avis*) on the preparedness of applicant countries to meet the membership criteria. The Commission forwards a questionnaire to the concerned government requesting information. On the basis of the responses to this questionnaire and other information gathered by the Commission in its annual reports about the candidate and potential candidate countries, the Commission might recommend to the European Council the opening of accession negotiations, on which the latter then decides under **unanimity**. The accession negotiations between the EU and the applicant country begin with the adoption of a negotiating framework and the opening of an intergovernmental conference (IGC). The content of the negotiations is broken down into chapters, each of which covers a policy area of the *acquis* (for example, competition policy, fisheries, or economic and monetary policy). Prior to the negotiation of a specific chapter, the Commission carries out a 'screening' of the *acquis* to familiarize the candidate with its content, as well as to evaluate its degree of preparedness.

The Commission plays a key role during the accession process, in particular through the monitoring of candidate countries' compliance and in drafting the EU's negotiating position. However, the process remains decidedly intergovernmental, as the opening

Figure 18.1 Key stages in the negotiation process



and closing of each of the negotiating chapters requires the unanimous agreement of the 27 member states. The term 'negotiations' is actually a misnomer: candidate countries cannot affect the substance of the negotiations, but only the timing of the implementation of the *acquis*. It is possible for candidate states to negotiate some transition periods, but also for the EU to impose some transitional measures or to withhold some benefits (such as financial disbursements) until a later date. For example, in the Eastern enlargement, a transitional period of up to seven years was agreed during which restrictions on the free movement of workers could be applied to workers from the new member states.

Once all of the chapters have been negotiated, the **accession treaty** must be approved by the European Parliament and needs to be ratified by each member state and the candidate country in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements. In most cases, candidate countries have held a referendum prior to joining the EU. The most recent referendum was held by Croatia in January 2012, with 66 per cent of the voters supporting EU membership (33 per cent voted against). However, as was the case with the referendums held by the CEEs, the turnout was very low (at 44 per cent).

KEY POINTS

- Compliance with the political conditions set out in the Copenhagen criteria is at the heart of the enlargement process.
- Conditionality remains the key mechanism guiding the accession of new members to the EU.
- The meritocratic nature of the enlargement process is an essential aspect in maintaining the credibility of the process.
- Enlargement remains an essentially intergovernmental process, firmly in the hands of the member states. The Commission plays a key role managing the accession negotiations and monitoring compliance with the accession criteria.

18.4 Explaining enlargement

EU enlargement is a complex process that challenges the explanatory power of European Studies' conceptual and theoretical toolkit. The academic scholarship discusses key aspects of enlargement as a process and accession as an outcome, their effect on power asymmetries, and on the adaptation capacity of the new member states and the EU. This section summarizes

the contributions of neo-functionalism (see Chapter 4), liberal intergovernmentalism (see Chapter 5), and constructivism (see Chapter 6) towards explaining the geographical expansion of the EU, as well as those of Europeanization (see Chapter 8) and differentiated integration theories. We draw mainly on the case of the Eastern enlargement given its extensive implications for both the EU and the candidate countries.

18.4.1 Neo-functionalism

While neo-functionalism was the first attempt at theorizing European integration, initially, it did not pay much attention to enlargement. Two interrelated reasons explain this: first, early neo-functionalism was too closely related to the empirical reality that it was trying to explain. In the 1960s, French President Charles de Gaulle's two vetoes of British membership did not suit the conceptual toolkit of neo-functionalism, which, like other theories of regional integration, analysed the establishment and stabilization of regional organizations, a process that precedes studying their territorial expansion (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002: 501). Second, at the time of the first enlargement (1973), neo-functionalism had already lost appeal among scholars of European integration (see Chapter 4). In the 1990s, the revived interest in the theory among scholars, and the research dynamism surrounding the Eastern enlargement provided the appropriate context for the theory's attempt to explain the geographical expansion of the EU. Neo-functionalism explains three dimensions of enlargement—namely, enlargement as a process, the role of **supranational institutions**, and functional integration. First, enlargement as a gradual process that involves several incremental stages from the point of membership application, through the association and pre-accession stages, leading to accession, reflects the neo-functionalist logic of the irreversibility of a process in which, as a result of successful negotiations, the full *acquis* is imposed upon the new members (Schmitter, 2004: 70). Second, during enlargement negotiations, the Commission plays a major role in managing the process and its entrepreneurial role is evident, for example, in its promotion of the **European Social Dialogue** in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, which is not strictly a criterion for accession (Pérez-Solórzano Borragán and Smismans, 2012). The Commission has traditionally supported the enlargement process to protect its leading role in this policy

area. Third, neo-functionalism accounts for the role of European **interest groups** supporting enlargement and coordinating their role transnationally, particularly by welcoming members from the new member states and by engaging in Commission-funded programmes to promote and support interest groups in the new member states (Blavoukos and Pagoulatos, 2008). Neo-functionalism, however, does not explain the role of domestic actors and structures in either the member states or the candidate countries; nor does it explain the effects of enlargement or its normative dimension (Niemann and Schmitter, 2009: 63).

18.4.2 Liberal intergovernmentalism

Rationalist approaches, such as liberal intergovernmentalism, see enlargement through the lens of national interests and state power, and regard the member states' promotion of accession as being in their long-term economic and geopolitical interest (Moravcsik and Vachudova, 2003). The contribution of liberal intergovernmentalism is twofold: on the one hand, it shows how 'the costs and benefits of socio-economic **interdependence**' (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2009: 80) inform whether member states and candidate countries support enlargement—and on the other hand, it focuses on how states bargain with each other in this typically intergovernmental policy. In the case of the Eastern enlargement, socio-economic factors informed preference formation in the member states to some extent, because countries that benefited the most from market expansion as a result of the accession of new member states, such as Germany or the UK, were supportive of a rapid and all-inclusive enlargement, while countries competing for EU funds with the new arrivals had a more conservative approach and thus preferred a more gradual and less inclusive geographical expansion (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2009: 83). Similarly, the bargaining process was an asymmetrical relationship between the member states, which could behave as 'an exclusive club dictating the terms of accession to new members' (Risse, 2009: 157), and a set of candidate countries, which accepted such demanding accession criteria in addition to temporary restrictions to the free movements of people, for example, to avoid exclusion from the EU (Vachudova, 2005: 65–79). What liberal intergovernmentalism is unable to explain is why the member states decided to go ahead with negotiating EU accession when, given their stronger position in this

asymmetrical relationship, they could have framed their advantageous relationship with their Eastern neighbours, plus Malta and Cyprus, in the context of an association or preferential status agreement, thus avoiding the costs resulting from enlargement.

18.4.3 Social constructivism

Social constructivism turns its attention to two questions unanswered by neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism: why did member states accept the Eastern enlargement? and why did candidate countries agree to transpose the *acquis communautaire*? The answers to these questions lie in three complementary propositions. First, as Schimmelfennig points out, the constitutive liberal values and norms of the European international community, which are at the basis of the membership criteria, commit member states to the accession of 'states that share the collective identity of an international community and adhere to its constituent values and norms' (Schimmelfennig, 2001: 58–9). In other words, the closer a country is to adhering to these norms, the closer it is to joining the EU. Thus 'rhetorical commitment to community values entrapped EU member states into offering accession negotiations . . . despite the initial preferences against enlargement' (Risse, 2009: 157). Second, Sedelmeier and Schimmelfennig stress this point by focusing on the discursive creation of a particular identity of the EU towards the new member states, which asserted 'a "special responsibility" of the EU for the reintegration of the peoples who had been involuntarily excluded from the integration project' (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002: 522). Third, Jacoby (2004) used the language of social learning and norm diffusion (see Chapter 8) to explain how institutional reform to adapt to EU accession requirements took place in the new member states. He placed elites at the core of a process characterized by the emulation of institutional models offered by the EU and the member states in the candidate countries. At a time of profound domestic change following the demise of the communist system, elites wished to 'accelerate their country's embrace of successful Western ways', but also had to cope with very specific norms propagated by the EU (Jacoby, 2004: 35), and a very detailed monitoring process aimed at checking the **transposition** of an extensive *acquis* and the country's administrative ability to implement it.

18.4.4 Europeanization

Europeanization is useful in explaining how, prior to EU accession, candidate and potential candidate countries are mainly 'takers' of EU policy thus illustrating the power asymmetry of the negotiation process. Top-down Europeanization helps explain the impact and costs of EU enlargement on a candidate's domestic environment including policies, politics, norms, and actors (see Chapter 8). Similarly, a discreet section of the Europeanization literature has devoted some attention to whether Europeanization is an irreversible process (Featherstone, 2003). Featherstone suggests that not only can the effects of Europeanization be differentiated over time, but also its systemic effects are not necessarily permanent or irreversible. Research on democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland, and Romania further illustrates the reversibility and impermanent nature of Europeanization and the (limited) ability of conditionality to promote democracy and governance effectiveness in non-member and new member states (Sedelmeier, 2008, 2014; Börzel and Schimmelfennig, 2017; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020).

18.4.5 Differentiated integration

The concept of differentiated or flexible integration—that is, a series of strategies to reconcile heterogeneity within the EU (Stubb, 1996: 2)—helps explain how enlargement has been a driver of internal differentiation in the EU and whether that differentiation is taking place along the divide between 'old' and 'new' member states. Enlargement means the accession of a more diverse set of countries with different capacities to adopt the entire *acquis communautaire*. Differentiated integration explains the phasing of the negotiation process, the use of conditionality, and the bespoke nature of each accession treaty that contains transitional arrangements with derogations from the full implementation of the *acquis* (Schimmelfennig and Winzen, 2017: 240). The withering of the initial differentiating between old and new member states is explained by the EU's capacity to integrate new and more diverse members and is reflected in the split between euro and non-euro area countries or Schengen and non-Schengen countries as key divides between member states. The focus of this chapter is the accession of new member states

rather than a country's withdrawal from the EU, as in the case of Brexit. However, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement signed between the EU and the UK is an association agreement whose content and negotiation owe much to the EU's experience negotiating similar agreements with candidates and other third countries. Thus the external differentiated integration literature (Gstöhl, 2015; Schimmelfennig 2018) and the metaphor of concentric circles of flexible European integration (Lavenex, 2011) shed light on the EU's political and economic strategies and templates to accommodate third countries, which, while not wishing to become member states, aspire to a close relationship with the Union. These models of external differentiated integration have been labelled as 'quasi-colonialism' to illustrate the EU's relationship with countries in the European Economic Area (EEA); 'pragmatic bilateralism' exemplified by the EU's relationship with Switzerland; 'association', such as the relationship under negotiation with Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay); and 'external governance', such as the Cotonou Agreement or the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between Canada and the EU (see Gstöhl and Phinnemore 2019 and Chapters 17 and 27).

KEY POINTS

- It is possible to explain aspects of enlargement from more than one theoretical perspective.
- Neo-functionalism explains the entrepreneurial role of the Commission, the role of European interest groups, and the gradual and incremental nature of enlargement.
- Liberal intergovernmentalism explains the socio-economic preferences behind member states' support for enlargement.
- Social constructivist approaches explain member states' commitment to enlargement despite the availability of alternative and less demanding options, such as association agreements.
- Europeanization helps explain the impact of EU enlargement on candidates' domestic environment and draws attention to the reversibility and impermanent nature of EU influence.
- Differentiated integration explains the strategies to reconcile heterogeneity within the EU.

18.5 The future of enlargement: key challenges

EU membership continues to be an attractive incentive for countries in the Union's neighbourhood. Accession negotiations were opened with Turkey in 2005 (see Box 18.1), Montenegro in 2012, Serbia in 2013, and Albania and North Macedonia in 2020. Bosnia and Herzegovina applied for EU membership in February 2016, but remains to date a 'potential candidate country', as is the case with Kosovo. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have repeatedly expressed their desire to become EU members one day. Despite the continuing attraction of the prospect of membership among its neighbours, and the fact that enlargement has been deemed the EU's most successful foreign policy, several challenges affect the enlargement project in the medium and long term. We deal with them in turn in the remainder of this chapter.

First, more than a decade after the Eastern enlargement, enlargement fatigue is very much evident in EU member states. EU citizens are very much split on the issue of 'further enlargement of the EU', although a small majority of 44 per cent support the process, while 42 per cent oppose it. (Eurobarometer, 2019: 95). Support for EU membership also varies across candidate countries. While Albanian, Macedonian, and Montenegrin citizens are still pro-EU membership (87 per cent, 57 per cent, and 54 per cent respectively), support for membership has continued to decline in Serbia (26 per cent) (Balkan Barometer, 2020: 40), and especially in Turkey, where only 28 per cent consider accession to the EU a 'good thing' (Eurobarometer, 2016: 78). Enlargement fatigue has also developed in the context of and fuelled by increasing support for populist Eurosceptic parties in the majority of EU member states who see enlargement as a source of insecurity, putting further pressure on migration and crippled welfare systems across the EU. While the exit of the UK from the EU has not led to an exit domino effect, it has removed one of the most fervent supporters of territorial expansion and, in the medium and long term, it might also have an impact on the EU's willingness and capacity to accommodate a larger and more heterogeneous membership.

Second, despite some positive signs, progress in the candidate countries has generally been disappointing. This results from three main factors: democratic backsliding; the legacies of the conflicts; and standing

bilateral issues. European integration imposes high adoption costs for politicians in the candidate countries (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2019). In some cases, EU integration not only threatens the power base of local elites, but also their private economic interests, because many of them profit from weak legal and regulatory frameworks and are involved in organized crime. The Commission has identified problems in the candidate and potential candidate countries that have hindered reforms in relation to the independence of the judiciary, the fight against corruption and organized crime, a highly confrontational political climate, and ethnic-related tensions. Particularly worrying is democratic backsliding. Observers have accused the EU of turning a blind eye to the so-called 'stabilitocrats' in the region (Vučić in Serbia or Djukanović in Montenegro) by favouring stability over democratic reforms in a context of increased geopolitical competition and security challenges in the neighbourhood. Problems of compliance with the rule of law within the EU (e.g., in the cases of Hungary or Poland) have also sent the wrong signal to candidate countries. In fact, some scholars have argued that EU conditionality has contributed to processes of state capture in the Western Balkans. The economic liberalization, top-down, and elitist processes that characterize the enlargement process have consolidated powerful clientelist networks in the region (Richter and Wunsch, 2019).

Many of these problems are also linked to the legacies of the conflicts that affected the Western Balkans region in the 1990s and 2000s. The effectiveness of EU conditionality remains low in countries in which the legacies of ethnic conflict make compliance with EU criteria very costly, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Political, economic, and social reforms have fallen hostage to recalcitrant nationalist politicians in Bosnia and threaten the European perspective of Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Bilateral disputes, and in particular the Kosovo issue, remain a significant obstacle to regional cooperation.

Third, there is evidence of the increasing politicization or 'creeping nationalization' of enlargement (Hillion, 2010). EU member states have sought to strengthen their influence over the EU's enlargement policy by insisting on the use of benchmarks before the opening of negotiating chapters and the inclusion

of new conditions in every step of the process. In recent years, Germany has emerged as the 'reluctant hegemon' in the Western Balkans by taking the lead in different initiatives, while other countries have followed German leadership (e.g., Austria, Slovenia with the Berlin Process, or the UK in the case of Bosnia). For Germany, leading in the case of enlargement provides it with an opportunity to control the process to ensure that candidate countries meet the accession criteria before membership is granted. For its part, a French veto of the opening of membership talks for Albania and North Macedonia in 2019 was justified by French President Emmanuel Macron as a way to ensure that the process remains politically driven. The veto was lifted when the European Commission presented a new enlargement strategy in March 2020 (entitled 'a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans'), which foresees a stronger input from the member states throughout the process, while strengthening the monitoring mechanisms. On the plus side, candidate countries will receive more rewards and incentives along the way and it is expected that clearer conditions will make the process more predictable.

The rising number of bilateral disputes holding up the enlargement process also constitutes another indication of a stronger role of the member states in the enlargement process. For example, some member states have used their privileged position inside the EU to put pressure on candidate countries in the hope that they will make concessions (Geddes and Taylor, 2016). Thus, Turkey's accession has been delayed over the conflict with Cyprus (see Box 18.1), the adoption of a negotiating framework for North Macedonia has been blocked by Bulgaria since 2020 because of a dispute over the 'Macedonian language', and last, but not least, Kosovo's independence remains a divisive issue among member states.

Fourth, the enlargement process has also been regularly impacted by external crises. The 2008 economic crisis had a major impact on enlargement by slowing down the process of economic convergence between the new and old member states, and between the EU and the candidate and potential candidate countries. The economic crisis resulted in an increase of unemployment, which was already very high in some candidate countries, and worsened the fiscal position of many of these countries. Moreover, the crisis continued to erode the EU's attraction power—its so-called

'soft power'—in particular vis-à-vis countries such as Turkey and neighbouring countries under Russia's sphere of influence. For many candidate countries, the way the EU has handled the 'refugee crisis' caused by the Syrian civil war also contributed to weakening the EU's image as a soft or normative power (see Chapter 26). The health, social, and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have only added to these problems as the EU has been criticized in the region for failing to show solidarity during the early stages of the pandemic and the vaccine rollout (see Chapter 28 and Juncos, 2021).

Fifth, the EU's enlargement policy is taking place in an increasingly competitive geopolitical context. In particular, the annexation of Crimea, the civil war in Ukraine, and Russia's treatment of opposition figures such as Alexei Navalni have strained EU–Russia relations, as illustrated by the EU's imposition of economic sanctions on Russia and the latter's retaliation by limiting food imports from the EU member states. Hence, in the medium term, and despite the EU's view that Moscow cannot veto EU expansion, the EU's approach to enlargement in the Balkans and to its Eastern neighbours is likely to be shaped by an increasingly belligerent Russian Federation, which regards Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia as part of its sphere of influence. While China's approach has been subtler so far and focused on strengthening of bilateral

economic relations, its presence in the neighborhood also challenges the EU's attraction power by deploying an alternative narrative of economic growth without political conditionality. For instance, China has used the vaccine rollout to strengthen its role in the Western Balkan region. The disinformation, fake news, and 'battle of narratives' witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic also illustrate the geopolitical games that are being played out in the region.

KEY POINTS

- The prospect of EU membership continues to attract countries in the EU's neighbourhood.
- Despite the continuing potential of EU membership to promote political and economic reforms in candidate countries, the enlargement project faces significant internal and external challenges.
- Enlargement to the Western Balkans and Turkey faces domestic obstacles in the form of high adoption costs, the legacies of the conflicts, and ongoing bilateral issues.
- A growing enlargement fatigue, Euroscepticism, the increasing politicization of this policy, the aftermath of the economic and COVID-19 crises, and geopolitical competition risk undermining the credibility of EU enlargement.

18.6 Conclusion

The enlargement project has remained intrinsically linked to the project of European integration. Enlargement has both shaped and been shaped by the development of the European Union over time. A more complex EU has meant that the conditions of membership have also become tighter and more technical in nature. Different enlargement waves have also been affected by the internal dynamics within the EU. As the Union has extended its borders and increased its membership from six to 27, questions have also been raised about the ability of an enlarged Union to be able to function effectively. Thus each enlargement has required numerous institutional and policy reforms in order to allow the Union to incorporate the new member states. Undoubtedly, the

most significant decision for the EU was to expand to Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, because of the number and diversity of applicant countries. The **Europeanization** of the candidate countries has had a significant impact on their institutions, politics, and policies, and has generally been seen as a key incentive in promoting political and economic reforms and fostering stability despite some evidence of democratic backsliding. Yet, in a context where Brexit has, for the first time, led to the contraction of the EU, and given other significant internal and external challenges, how the EU will ensure the incorporation of new members, while continuing to further integrate in new areas such as economic and fiscal governance, will thus remain crucial.



QUESTIONS

1. How is it possible to explain the decision of the European Union to enlarge?
2. How similar are the different rounds of enlargement?
3. To what extent has the enlargement process become increasingly politicized over time?
4. What roles do the Commission, European Parliament, and member states play in the process of enlargement?
5. How important is conditionality in the enlargement process?
6. How successful has EU enlargement been to date?
7. What internal and external challenges is the enlargement process likely to face in the coming years?
8. What is the likely impact of Brexit on the enlargement process?



GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Börzel, T.A., Dimitrova, A., and Schimmelfennig, F. (2017) 'European Union Enlargement and Integration Capacity', *Journal of European Public Policy*, Special Issue 24/2, 157–315. An excellent in-depth analysis of the consequences of the EU's Eastern enlargement.

Grabbe, H. (2006) *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan). An excellent account of the impact of the EU's conditionality on the candidate countries during the Eastern enlargement.

Kelemen, R.D., Menon, A., and Slapin, J. (2015) *The European Union: Integration and Enlargement* (London: Routledge). This book examines the debate of widening versus deepening by looking at the impact of enlargement on EU integration.

Noutcheva, G. (2012) *European Foreign Policy and the Challenges of Balkan Accession: Conditionality, Legitimacy, and Compliance* (London: Routledge). This book offers an in-depth analysis of why the Western Balkan states have varied so much in their compliance with the EU's accession requirements.

Schimmelfennig, F. and Sedelmeier, U. (2020) 'The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: The External Incentives Model Revisited', *Journal of European Public Policy* 27/6 : 814–33. An application of the external incentives model to different stages and waves of enlargement.

Solveig R. and Wunsch, N. (2020) 'Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27/1, 41–62. A discussion relating to the challenges relating to conditionality and the rule of law in the Western Balkans.

Vollaard, H. (2014) 'Explaining European Disintegration', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 52: 1142–59. This article offers a useful explanation of European disintegration as a multi-causal phenomenon.



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