

➤ Executive Summary

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Enlargement is widely hailed as the EU's most successful foreign policy tool. Over the past four decades, the European Community (which became the European Union in 1993) managed to transform itself from a club of six Western European democracies to the world's largest economy, encompassing 28 countries and half a billion people. The recent financial crisis, however, has given rise to doubts about the viability and the attractiveness of the EU model. In this context of soft power crisis, the EU has a policy problem, that, according to Günter Verheugen, 'the enlargement process now lacks any strategic orientation'. Enlargement faces daunting challenges both internally and with respect to its neighbours. If the EU hopes to revive its most successful foreign policy tool, it must reconsider why it has been successful in the past and integrate these lessons to develop a new strategy.

As N. Piers Ludlow explains, enlargement was never part of the initial European project when it began in the 1950s, yet it eventually became one of the EU's most important and successful policies. While the first enlargement of 1973 welcomed other Western European democracies (the UK, Ireland and Denmark), no long-term strategy for enlargement was developed. Only with the Greek accession in 1981 did the strategy of democratisation enter into the enlargement process. As Eirini Karamouzi demonstrates, from that point onward the Community sought to encourage and entrench democratic transitions among its neighbours, with membership being their ultimate reward. Moreover, democratisation was linked to security considerations in the geopolitical context of the Cold War. Cristina Blanco Sío-López describes how the Community developed and institutionalised its enlargement strategy through the Spanish accession in 1986 to shape the eastern enlargement of 2004. Post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe, meanwhile, sought to assimilate to the Western European model, as Anne Applebaum explains, by adopting Community membership as an overriding policy objective. The peaceful spread of democracy across the continent and the successful integration of these countries has been one of the greatest successes of the EU.

Today, however, enlargement is confronted with significant challenges. Democratisation proved to be a powerful and popular tool first in Southern Europe, then in the former Eastern bloc, as states eagerly undertook reforms in order to secure their 'return to Europe'. A quarter century after the end of the Cold War, however, this strategy has been exhausted. Eschewing the more ambitious objective of democratic transformation, enlargement strategy is now driven by the more ambiguous goals of 'peace, security and prosperity'.

Internally, the economic crisis has all but paralysed the enlargement process. As John O'Brennan argues, the crisis has damaged the EU's reputation as an attractive economic giant. Established members decry having to absorb the costs of assisting less prosperous states at the EU's borders. At the same time, the implementation of painful reforms is now considered less palatable by applicant countries, especially now, when the end prize seems to have lost so much of its lustre. Even the hard-won accession of Croatia in July 2013 was met with only muted celebrations. Moreover, there is a lack of safeguards in the EU to prevent backsliding by states once they become members. While the accession process becomes ever more arduous, the EU has remarkably limited means to deal with issues ranging from worsening corruption in Bulgaria and Romania to democratic regression in Hungary.

Meanwhile, the EU faces external challenges in its shared neighbourhood. While Russia initially did not oppose eastern enlargement, an increasingly strident Moscow is now belatedly pushing for a rival economic bloc, the Eurasian Union. As Joan DeBardeleben notes, the EU has no coherent strategy for dealing with Russia, which risks making their competition for influence over their common neighbours increasingly antagonistic. The EU's response to this predicament has thus far been unsatisfactory. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched to deal with the EU's neighbours with tools other than promises of accession. However, as David Cadier writes, the ENP has been executed as merely an equivocal and unfocused version of the enlargement strategy.

At a time when the EU is looking to emerge from the ongoing economic crisis and to reinforce its foreign policy credentials, a reinvigorated enlargement policy can play a key role. The EU must do more to convince its own citizens, as well as those of the Western Balkans, Turkey and ultimately Ukraine of the merits of enlargement. The EU must also develop tools to ensure that reforms are maintained once states join. This could help facilitate the accession process, which has steadily grown so demanding that no country is expected to join the EU by 2020. More broadly, the EU must develop a coherent strategy for dealing with Russia. Furthermore, the ENP must depart from the enlargement template and emerge as a distinct policy in order to influence its neighbours without the guarantee of enlargement.

It is a well-worn cliché in Brussels that the European project is like a bicycle: it must continue to move forward lest it collapse. Simple inertia, however, is no longer sufficient. In the context of the ongoing crisis, the EU must re-evaluate why enlargement has been successful in the past and understand the obstacles facing it today. Only then will the EU be able to reconceptualise enlargement for a new era and revive its foundering soft power. ■