

EU enlargement – Zeitenwende or old wine in new bottles?

The debate on widening and deepening the EU might be an old one but it still requires answers, especially in light of the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on the enlargement debate. The EU needs to develop the right combination of internal reforms and enlargement policy. Variable geometries of Europe can provide a helpful stepping stone in this regard.

A *Zeitenwende* in the EU's enlargement policy

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has led to a fundamental geopolitical restructuring in Europe. This is clearly reflected in the enlargement policy of the European Union (EU). Its member states responded rapidly to the Association Trio countries' application for membership. Moldova and Ukraine received candidate status while Georgia was set conditions to be given this status. Additionally, the accession process for the Western Balkan states has gained momentum. Accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia have become unblocked and are open while the European Council granted conditional candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022 acting on a recommendation of the European Commission. Finally, a new forum for strengthening security, stability and prosperity on the continent was established in October 2022 in the form of the European Political Community.

In short, just like Germany's security policy did in the wake of the full invasion of Ukraine, the enlargement policy that had faced deadlock for several years experienced a

Zeitenwende, becoming one key element for the EU to meet the geopolitical challenges emanating from the war. However, a number of questions critical for the future shape of the European continent still need answers, building on the *Zeitenwende* of 2022.

The fundamental question of who belongs to the EU in principle seems to have been answered by the prospects of accession and the granting of candidate status. However, accession negotiations are open-ended. The case of Turkey clearly illustrates how long such a process can take – and that it may not necessarily end with full membership. Accession is decided not only on the basis of a candidate's ability to join but also of the interests and political will of the EU and its member states. For example, the security interests of the member states supported the political will to give an accession perspective to Ukraine in solidarity with the country and as a signal against Russia's expansive war of aggression. At the same time, however, such politically symbolic steps raise the question of the objective equal treatment of accession candidates and of coherence in EU enlargement policy. The impression that may have been created in Ukraine and other candidates that accession can take place relatively quickly after the end of the war calls for thorough expectation management by the EU. The EU also needs to be transparent about the fact that meeting the accession criteria remains the crucial requirement for candidate countries and demands internal reforms on their part.

Regarding the internal effects of EU enlargement, it is unquestionable that the EU will have to remain functional with eventually more than 35 member states. To ensure

this, institutional and procedural reforms are necessary, which will in all likelihood delay the enlargement process. At the same time, however, protracted accession processes risk becoming self-defeating as frustration grows in candidate countries and their willingness to reform declines. Concepts of differentiated integration or forms of a staged accession should therefore be considered in order to break down mental blocks and to identify development prospects.

Germany's position: how to square the circle between enlargement and EU internal reforms?

Germany's government was not among the first to react positively to Ukraine's application for EU membership after Russia's full invasion. It was not before his joint trip with France's President Emmanuel Macron and Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi to Kyiv in June 2022 that Chancellor Olaf Scholz clearly spoke out in favour of granting Ukraine candidate status. He further underlined his commitment to the EU's enlargement towards the Association Trio and the Western Balkans in a speech [in Prague](#) in August. The position of the chancellery, however, clearly places EU institutional reforms before enlargement steps. This was reiterated in the January 2023 French-German declaration on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty in Paris.

The government's coalition agreement of December 2021 put forward a very ambitious EU reform agenda by aiming for a European Convention as follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe, leading to the eventual establishment of a European federation. Today, the government's reform agenda is much more pragmatic, focusing on institutional reforms that might be possible within the existing treaty framework. In view of an enlarged Union comprising potentially 35+ member states, the increased use of qualified majority voting seems to be one key condition for maintaining the EU's ability to function. As the government is not a strong supporter of differentiated integration among groups of member states and/or accession countries, the elimination of veto powers in EU decision-making is a priority.

Another priority of Germany's government is supporting the countries of the Western Balkans in their alignment with the EU's *acquis* and in establishing stability and prosperity in the region. The Berlin Process that was launched in 2014 provided an important framework for exchanges among civil society organizations in Berlin in 2022. The government aimed for improved regional cooperation, perceiving this to be the key for successful integration into the EU. The three agreements on mobility that were successfully concluded in Berlin reflect this ambition.

Germany also welcomes the European Political Community as a forum for reaching common positions on different issues with the aim to strengthen peace and security on the continent. It also clearly distinguishes the European Political Community from the enlargement process by stating that it is everything but enlargement as well as everything but institutions.

The war in Ukraine has had a clear impact on German public opinion regarding EU enlargement. In the summer of 2022, according to [Statista](#), 52 per cent were in favour of enlargement, an increase of about 20 per cent points from the previous winter. For the first time in years, the share of respondents in favour of enlargement exceeds that of its opponents. Time will tell whether rising inflation, soaring energy prices, and other economic costs of the war changes this picture.

What next?

General support for enlargement alone does not guarantee an efficient or effective policy. The EU still lacks a suitable roadmap for its enlargement policy. This needs to take account of a variety of elements.

First, there is the need for transparency regarding the fact that the eventual accession of nine new member states will transform the EU on various levels. The EU therefore cannot compromise on candidate countries fulfilling the accession criteria (particularly in the area of the rule of law and environmental standards) or its ability to absorb these additional members. This might look like the old debate over the EU's deepening and/or widening under new circumstances but it still requires an answer.

Second, timing is a crucial factor. The Western Balkan countries have been at different stages in the accession process for more than ten years while Moldova and Ukraine expect a speedy emergency accession. Hence, the EU faces a lot of impatience. It should not yield to pressure to rush to decisions. But the EU should not either let the accession process take so long that this undermines candidates' trust in its eventual success and hence its transformative effect. As this implies that it will not be possible for widening to wait for the completion of deepening, a combination of both needs to be sought. The fact that those member states that tend to oppose internal reforms are also strongly in favour of enlargement represents a starting point for negotiations on a package deal involving deepening and widening.

For this to happen, Germany's government needs to define its vision of the institutional reforms required to increase the EU's absorption capacity that demand treaty change and lobby for these with like-minded member states such as France. Scholz' speech in Prague did not contain very detailed reform proposals. The January 2023 French-German declaration outlines a more detailed

agenda referring to decision making, preservation of the rule of law and increasing democracy in the EU. A Franco-German expert group has been tasked by the two ministries of foreign affairs to elaborate the reforms that would make the EU fit for enlargement.

Third, the EU's enlargement policy itself needs reform and the current circumstances open a window of opportunity for this. All sides involved – the EU, the member states and the candidate countries – need to be open to the concept of differentiation within the accession process. Differentiation should be clearly merit-based and allow for a multi-speed accession instead of permanent exclusion of candidate countries.

Fourth, the EU's enlargement policy should relate to the variable geometries that structure wider Europe. The European Political Community and forms of sectoral cooperation in critical infrastructure such as energy, transport, information and cyber are – although clearly distinct from enlargement – helpful in engaging with the

countries of the eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans as well as for countering the influence of actors such as Russia or China in these regions.

Finally, Germany and the EU need to develop a strategy for dealing with Turkey, which remains a blank space in current debates on enlargement. In the eyes of the EU, Turkey has gone from accession country to strategic partner and lately to unavoidable partner. The country's parliamentary and presidential elections this spring will have an important impact on EU-Turkish relations as they will determine whether its future will be under the continued regime of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or a new government composed of six current opposition parties.

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