



Mission almost impossible

Dilemmata of a southern and eastern enlargement of the European Union

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ABSTRACT Tensions between enlargement and further integration have accompanied the EU's development for a long time. Under the special geopolitical conditions under which enlargement to include the Balkan and Black Sea countries must take place, this gives rise to several dilemmas that are difficult to resolve. The policy brief discusses geopolitical rivalry, time pressure, democratic deficits in the accession countries, sovereignty consciousness in the accession countries and sovereignism in the EU, multiple distribution conflicts and elimination of buffer zones including war.

Keywords: European Union enlargement, sovereignism in the EU, democratic deficits, stability-democracy dilemma

Majdnem lehetetlen küldetés. Az Európai Unió déli és keleti bővítésének dilemmái

ABSZTRAKT Az Európai Unió fejlődését hosszú ideje végigkísérik az integráció bővítéséhez, a további tagállamok csatlakozásához kapcsolódó feszültségek. A balkáni és fekete-tengeri országok speciális adottságokkal rendelkeznek, ezért számos kihívás és dilemma merül fel az Európai Unióba belépésükre vonatkozóan. A tanulmány célja, hogy egy szakpolitikai összefoglalót nyújtson a déli és keleti bővítés dilemmáiról, olyan fontos témaköröket érintve, mint a geopolitikai rivalizálás, a csatlakozó országok demokratikus hiányosságai, a szuverenitás kérdései a csatlakozó országokban és az unióban, a többszörös elosztási konfliktusok, valamint a háborús helyzet következményei.

Kulcsszavak: uniós csatlakozás, szuverenitás az Európai Unióban, demokratikus deficit, stabilitás-demokrácia dilemma

INTRODUCTION – WHAT IS AT STAKE?

It is by no means certain that it will be *one* round of enlargement. But strong geopolitical pressure has led to the coming enlargement to the south *and* east being thought of and discussed as a package. In any case, the current discourse of the think tanks relevant to European policy is predominantly about an enlargement round and its difficulties. So we are talking about the accession processes of the Balkan countries Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and the Black Sea countries Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. It is not very likely that all of these countries will become EU members at the same time. But the accession process of a smaller package also confronts the European Union with special problems. What is at stake?



The special framework conditions under which an enlargement to the south and east must take place create an extreme tension between enlargement and integration and lead to numerous dilemmas for the EU. I argue here that an enlargement of the European Union to the south and east is hardly manageable in terms of integration policy but is geopolitically necessary. This is the basic dilemma facing the European Union at present (2025). I discuss six problems as reasons why “the old ‘widening versus deepening’ dilemma” (Croft et al. 1999: 78, Vobruba 2003) has intensified compared to 2004/2007: 1. geopolitical rivalry, 2. time pressure, 3. democratic deficits in the accession countries, 4. sovereignty consciousness in the accession countries and sovereigntism in the EU, 5. multiple distribution conflicts, 6. elimination of buffer zones including war.

THE GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY

Although geopolitical rivalries have always played a role in the EU’s expansion, they are now more intense and explicit: „This firm, merit-based prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union’s very own political, security and economic interest. In times of increasing global challenges and divisions, it remains more than ever a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe. A credible accession perspective is the key incentive and driver of transformation in the region and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity.” (European Commission 2020: 1) However, the EU’s expansion policy continues to be guided by the “Eurocentric attitude” (Lehne 2014: 7) that it has immense appeal to its neighbours as a “magnet for prosperity” and as an “exporter of values”, meaning that the interest in accession lies predominantly with the candidate countries. The basic pattern that emerges from this view is as follows: The EU formulates accession conditions and checks readiness for accession. The EU slows down, the candidates push. This pattern never quite corresponded to reality, as can be shown by reconstructing the dynamics of European expansion as a chain of political trade-offs: It has always been about a balancing of interests between the countries of the outer periphery and the EU. With regard to the failure of the ENP, this also corresponds to the insight of ENP Commissioner Johannes Hahn that “the idea that our power of attraction would eventually seduce all our neighbours has been proven inaccurate. We were too optimistic.” (quoted from Perchoc 2017: 28) In the run-up to a possible southward and eastward enlargement of the EU, the geopolitical framework conditions have shifted significantly to the detriment of the EU. What is new is that there is an alternative – albeit for the time being relatively modest – promise of prosperity in the form of the People’s Republic of China. In other words, the EU is assuming a constellation of interests with regard to enlargement that has been overtaken by reality.

The shift in the constellation of interests to the detriment of the EU weakens the EU’s negotiating position and reduces the effectiveness of all conditionalities for the accession countries. Threats of sanctions, especially the possibility of downgrades in the accession process, as provided for in the Commission’s Revised Enlargement Methodology (REM) since 2020, become implausible. The dilemma¹ facing the EU is that, on the one hand, it needs the

¹ Although the European Parliament’s “In Depth Analysis” of the ENP mentions “the dilemma of conditionality without enlargement” (Perchoc 2017: 5), it does not analyze it.



new possibility of negative conditionality in order to be able to react to deteriorations in the political, constitutional, etc. situation in a country that occur during the accession process (European Commission 2020: 7). The EU needs the new possibility of negative conditionality in order to be able to react to deteriorations in the political, constitutional, etc. situation in a country that occur during the accession process (European Commission 2020: 7). On the other hand, however, this is countered by the demand – especially from accession countries themselves – that the accession perspective must be credible and reliable in order to have a transformative effect in the accession countries. “Pro-reform and pro-modernization incentives can work only if the enlargement process remains credible and affordable for EU candidates” (Dabrowski 2022).

TIME PRESSURE

The decisive factor for linking the accession processes of the Balkan countries and the Black Sea countries Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine. Prior to this, the process of EU enlargement to the Balkans had been dormant for many years.

1. table Waiting times for the Balkan countries

	Membership application	Candidate status	Start of accession negotiations
Albania	2009	2014	2020/2022
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	2022	2024
Kosovo	2022		
Montenegro	2008	2010	2012
North Macedonia	2004	2005	2020/2022
Serbia	2009	2012	2013

Reference: simplified after Dabrowski – Moffat 2024

The accession processes of the Western Balkan countries were given new impetus by the accession dynamics of the Black Sea countries threatened by Russia (European Commission 2023; Vulovic 2024).

2. table Waiting times for the Black Sea countries

	Membership application	Candidate status	Start of accession negotiations
Ukraine	2022	2022	2024
Georgia	2022	2023	2024 angehalten
Moldova	2022	2022	2023

Reference: Author’s own elaboration



The Russian invasion of Ukraine began on 24. 2. 2022. Ukraine applied for EU membership on 28. 2. 2022, Georgia and Moldova followed on 3. 3. 2022. Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status on 23. 6. 2023, Georgia on 14. 12. 2023. In response to Georgia's government policy, which is considered incompatible with EU standards, negotiations were halted on 28. 6. 2024. In view of this pace, there was immediate concern in the EU that the Balkan countries would see their sluggish accession processes as an unacceptable imposition and that feelings of disadvantage could turn into permanent movements to break away from the EU. Added to this is the rivalry with the People's Republic of China for economic influence in the Balkans. The southern and eastern enlargement thus became a package and a "geostrategic imperative" (Kribbe – van Middelaar 2023). The example of Turkey, whose failure to join the EU led to its geopolitical seesaw policy, may also have played a role in this.

The bundling of the two processes, the closing of the Balkan gap and the admission of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, led to accession negotiations being started with countries that are highly relevant to the EU in geopolitical terms, but whose level of democratic, constitutional and economic development – measured against EU accession standards – is highly deficient. The EU is therefore faced with a dilemma between geopolitical and military requirements and incalculable integration costs. This dilemma is being used strategically, at least by the present Hungarian government, to increase the pressure to join. The Orbán regime is trying to speed up accession negotiations with Serbia in particular, partly in the hope to gain a potential ally in the EU. At the same time, it is being reported quasi-officially by the government that the majority of EU member states do not want the Balkan countries to join. „Everyone is publicly in favor of enlargement, but when the 27 of us foreign ministers close the door behind us, the majority speaks against enlargement”²

The dilemma for the EU is that it is under time pressure due to the geopolitical rivalry for the accession processes, but that on the other hand the development of the rule of law, repression of corruption, etc. takes time, and this before accession. This is because through the experiences with Poland (until 2023) and Hungary, the EU has "realized that it has less leverage in this area over members (post-accession) than over candidates" (Kribbe – van Middelaar 2023).

DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS IN THE ACCESSION COUNTRIES

Most of the candidates for southern and eastern enlargement are characterized by a sharp division of their populations into pro- and anti-EU attitudes. Behind this are different perceptions of national identity, which are hardly capable of compromise and have the potential for civil war. This creates a sanctions dilemma for the EU in view of anti-Western policies (e.g. the NGO law in Georgia): if the EU imposes sanctions that affect the entire country, it frustrates the pro-EU faction; if it does not react, it strengthens the anti-EU faction. Either the pro-EU group feels penalized or it accuses the EU of unduly upgrading autocratic governments (Lippert 2023a: 3). This is the prerequisite for a blockade that has brought the

² Foreign Minister Slams EU's Hypocrisy on Western Balkan Enlargement. Hungary Today 19. 9. 2024. <https://hungarytoday.hu/foreign-minister-slams-eus-hypocrisy-on-western-balkan-enlargement/>



enlargement process in the Balkans to a standstill for a long time: In contrast to the phase prior to the 2004 enlargement, the prospects of accession in the Balkans at present (2025) are hardly triggering a spirit of optimism and thus substantial reform processes towards democracy and the rule of law (Vulovic 2024) So the EU is waiting for progress on the rule of law, etc. progress, and the accession countries are waiting for incentives for reform and integration. As a result of the blockade, the accession processes are dragging on and support for accession is waning in both the EU and the accession countries.

Closely related to the sanctions dilemma is the stability-democracy dilemma. On the one hand, the rapid expansion of the EU is necessary in order to counter rival expansionist policies. On the other hand, however, there is the requirement that the accession countries are actually “ready for accession” (Bonomi – Mastrorocco 2024: 14). It can be assumed that democracy is insufficiently realized in all accession countries (see the brief overview in Maugeais 2023). On the one hand, the establishment of democratic institutions is a prerequisite for accession³, but on the other hand, the creation of political stability in the periphery is a key motive for EU enlargement. Political stability and established democracy are compatible, but political stability and the transition to democracy are hardly compatible.

The dilemma facing the EU can also be described as the incompatibility of two different time horizons: In the long term, democratization is the appropriate means for political stability; in the short term, however, it disrupts the political stability that authoritarian regimes guarantee. The EU's short-term interest in stability is at odds with its commitment to promote democracy. This dilemma cannot be resolved with well-meaning appeals (Maugeais 2023: 6). It has been exacerbated by the changing geopolitical conditions, the time pressure and the special difficulties of democratization under wartime conditions (Sirbiladze Ventura 2023).

THE SENSE OF SOVEREIGNTY IN THE ACCESSION COUNTRIES AND SOVEREIGNISM IN THE EU

In the course of a southern and eastern enlargement the EU faces a problem that already became virulent after the eastward enlargement of 2004/07: The defense of national sovereignty as a question of identity. In the Balkans an ethnonationalist-based sense of sovereignty dominates (Petritsch, Pichler 2004), which was consolidated by the wars following the collapse of Yugoslavia and sets narrow limits on political and cultural rapprochement with the EU. Regardless of how it ends, the war of aggression against Ukraine has decisively consolidated its complex identity (Riabchuk 2010), as Putin has made Russia “Ukraine’s constitutive other” (Wilson 2023: 14). To a lesser extent, this probably also applies to Moldova and Georgia. For this reason, the political elites and large parts of the populations of the accession countries cannot be expected to immediately hand over relevant aspects of their recently acquired national sovereignty to the supranational level, to “Brussels”. The EU dilemma is therefore that, on the one hand, these countries can only be integrated as fully

³ On the relationship between EU-supported democratization, its acceptance by the populations and the positions of political elites in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, cf. Sirbiladze, Ventura (2023).



sovereign states, but that, on the other hand, their national concept of sovereignty means that considerable integration problems are inevitable. The unwieldy problem of identity and democracy is exacerbated by the fact that it finds a counterpart within the EU.

In the last 20 years, the term “sovereignty” has degenerated into a reactionary fighting word, so “that it is irremediably discredited.” (Outhwaite 2021: 35, Vobruba 2012). However, this does not mean ignoring it but rather taking its rhetorical use seriously as a problem in social science and politics. In this sense, it can be stated that a “populist sovereignty”, or “PopSovism” for short (De Spiegeleire et al. 2017), has spread within the EU and consolidated in party politics. In contrast to the situation 20 years ago, there are right-wing parties whose stance on the EU is (at best) ambiguous, and an extreme right-wing scene that politically exploits unresolved EU dilemmas and turns them into fundamental criticism of the EU. In particular, the Commission is the agency of a globalist agenda, a recipient of orders from the USA, corrupt, has a democratic deficit and is destroying sovereignty – all against the backdrop of a populist concept of the “will of the people”, which is allegedly being sabotaged by the aloof EU elites. I cannot go into the spread of such ideas in conspiracy theory texts here (cf. Vobruba 2024: 68). However, it is clear that there are direct links between conspiracy journalism and EU-relevant politics. I refer only to the Hungarian president’s justification for the “Sovereignty Act” (December 2023) to monitor organizations with foreign financial sources: Foreign countries want to “buy Hungary by the kilo” (Tagesschau 5. 2. 2024). The links between sovereigntist texts in the Hungarian government’s self-portrayal platform “Hungary Today” and in so-called alternative media and radical right-wing publications are also relevant here. The fact that Hungary has lost approx. one billion euros in cohesion funds due to rule of law deficits was interpreted by an Austrian conspiracy scene magazine as a “hybrid war against Budapest” and as a sign that “the EU’s war against national sovereignty”⁴ is being intensified. Such cross-connections exist among all those political forces that have united in the EU Parliament as the “Patriots for Europe”, “soon derided as “Putinists for Europe”” (The Economist July 13th 2024). The present Hungarian government is just the most striking example.

MULTIPLE DISTRIBUTION CONFLICTS

Enlargement leads to multiple distribution conflicts, which are determined by a two-stage prosperity gap: differences between old and new members; differences between new members and accession countries. Here are some key figures to illustrate this (GDP/capita adjusted for purchasing power; IMF estimates for 2024): Germany US\$ 67,240; Bulgaria US\$ 35,960; Kosovo US\$ 16,780; Ukraine US\$ 15,460. This results in a ratio between Germany and Bulgaria of just under 2 to 1, between Bulgaria (the poorest EU member state) and Kosovo (the poorest Balkan country) of more than 2 to 1, and between Bulgaria and Ukraine of 2.3 to 1. The welfare gap between Germany and Ukraine is 4.35 to 1.

⁴ Thomas Oysmüller, Die EU verschärft den Krieg gegen Orbán. Tkp 3. 1. 2025. <https://tkp.at/2025/01/03/die-eu-verschaerft-den-krieg-gegen-orban/>. In the same sense: Thomas Fazi, EU targeting of Orbán should worry other member states. UnHerd January 1, 2025. ???



Among the many consequences of the dynamics that create welfare gaps, the distribution conflicts arising from the EU's redistribution rules are of particular interest here. The accession of countries with a significantly lower level of prosperity leads to conflicts between net contributors (core countries) and all net recipient countries, between old (eastern members) and new net recipient countries (south-eastern candidates), and it is generating resistance in particular from countries that are at risk of becoming net contributors rather than net recipients (Kribbe – van Middelaar 2023). There are already concerns about losing their own net recipient position (Emerson 2023). The pattern of conflict is familiar from the 2004/07 eastward enlargement. Foreseeable distribution conflicts will be exacerbated by various new challenges: from 2028 to 2058 by interest payments and repayment of the Community debt incurred to deal with the consequences of the coronavirus crisis (Vobruba 2023: 320ff.), by the growth of competing spending areas, particularly defense budgets, and by economic problems in Germany, which is by far the largest net contributor to the EU budget (Nowotny 2023: 7ff.).

A projection by the Jacques Delors Center of the Hertie School arrives at a notional annual budget burden of EUR 13.2 billion for the EU for the seven-year period 2021–2027 because of Ukraine's EU membership from 2021, of which around 90% would be attributable to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). "Fictitious" here means the assumption that the southern and eastern enlargement will take place under the multiannual financial framework (MFF), which was agreed for the period 2021–2027. Lindner, Nguyen and Hansum emphasize that the MFF will have to be renegotiated for the period from 2028, with an unpredictable outcome. For the accession of the Balkan countries and Moldova, they arrive at annual budget costs of EUR 5.8 billion using the same fictitious assumptions. In total, they estimate the annual budget burden of a southern and eastern enlargement of the EU (excluding Kosovo and Georgia) at EUR 19 billion (Lindner – Nguyen – Hansum 2023: 7). This results in a notional burden of 133 billion euros for the entire budget period. In this projection, there are no losses for the previous net beneficiary countries. On the same fictitious basis, Bruegel (Darvas et al. 2024) arrives at a budget burden for the EU of 126 billion euros in a baseline scenario and 110 billion euros in an alternative scenario due to Ukraine's accession alone. Darvas et al. emphasize that these figures do not consider financial returns from Ukraine to the EU 27 and are therefore (slightly) exaggerated. They expect changes in the support status of regions in some member states because of Ukraine's accession. „Some EU regions currently classified as 'less developed regions' would graduate to 'transition regions', and some current 'transition regions' would graduate to 'more developed regions', implying lower cohesion funding“ (Darvas et al. 2024: 6f.). However, their scenarios also do not result in any significant losses for the previous net recipients, at least none that do not already result from existing cut-off rules (Darvas et al. 2024: 53). However, all these projections are based on the fictitious assumption that the rules of the multiannual financial framework (MFF, 2021–2027) will apply to a future enlargement to the south and east and therefore only provide a rough indication of their costs and distributional conflicts. What is certain, however, is that an unintended consequence of individual Member States switching from net recipients to net contributors would be that the EU would effectively lose the financial sanction options that the "rule of law mechanism" has provided for since January 1, 2021.



THE ELIMINATION OF BUFFER ZONES. WAR

The EU's expansion policy has so far been based on the idea of a stable, prosperous core that is protected by multiple rings. The EU members with external EU borders form an inner ring, while the countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) form the outer ring. The relationship between the EU and the countries of the ENP could be understood as an offer of a political exchange: They assume buffer functions for the EU and in return are gradually included in the prosperity and stability of the EU. In principle, everything was possible for the ENP countries except participation in the political decision-making process and the EU's automatic redistribution mechanisms. The success of the ENP has fallen far short of the expectations placed in it. Nowhere has the EU's outer periphery become the intended "ring of friends" (Prodi 2002, European Commission 2023: 2). In the South, expansionist interests are met with cool-headed interest calculations (Faath 2007), in the East with hostility. This means that the EU must redefine its understanding of the buffer zone: Previously understood as barriers to mobility for the purpose of shielding against migration (Hilpert 2022), it now also means a security zone between the EU and Russia.

The EU's expansion policy to date has been a project to secure stability, often presented as an export of norms⁵, "a convergence agenda within a scenario of pacified spaces" (Lippert 2023b: 478; my translation). You can also put it like this: The eastward enlargement of 2004/2007 took place under the protection of NATO. All the countries joining the EU at that time were already members of NATO. The fact that the expansion process of NATO and the EU was largely frictionless was due to the weakness of the USSR/Russia at the time. However, this does not change the problem that the expansion dynamic to the east – at least from Putin's perspective – caused buffer zones to disappear.⁶ The Russian occupation of Crimea and the war of aggression against Ukraine confirmed this view of the problem symmetrically and reciprocally through the respective political reactions. Since 2022, there are no longer any countries that could act as a neutral buffer zone to shield the EU's expansion to the south and east. The EU must therefore "flank its enlargement policy with security policy and coordinate it transatlantically. Because it took a credibility risk when it gave Ukraine the prospect of accession in June 2022." (Lippert 2023b: 480, my translation) The problem is clear: the EU's credibility with regard to southern and eastern enlargement also depends on conditions ("transatlantic") that it does not have in hand.

The accession of the eastern neighbours Ukraine and Moldova is most clearly driven by the stability interests of the EU core. In principle, this is the same as the 2004/07 eastward enlargement, but the instability in this EU neighbouring region is being strategically deployed by third parties (i.e. Russia). That is the difference to 2004/07. The EU can therefore start accession negotiations with Ukraine during the war, but accession can only take place at the

⁵ This changed hesitantly when the revised ENP began to include the interests of the "neighbours of the neighbours" in its strategic considerations (Perchoc 2017: 27f.).

⁶ Ukraine's exposure was already registered in 2013 and the threat of war was even hinted at. However, not much followed from this. "Today, countries like Ukraine are more than ever seeking closer ties to the European Union, attracted by our economic and social model. We cannot turn our back on them. We cannot accept any attempts to limit these countries own sovereign choices. Free will and free consent need to be respected." (Barroso 2013) The next but one sentence of the speech contains the word "war".



cost of the EU being drawn into the war due to its obligation to provide assistance (Article 42(7) TEU). The EU is therefore faced with the dilemma of either taking this risk of war or accepting that Russia has a de facto veto over Ukraine's accession.

CONCLUSION

The starting point was the thesis that a southern and eastern enlargement of the European Union is hardly feasible in terms of integration policy but is geopolitically necessary. This is the basic dilemma the European Union is currently (2025) facing. The change in the geopolitical framework and time pressure have weakened the EU's position and exacerbated its problems in enforcing standards of readiness for accession. Closely related to this is the dilemma arising from the divisions of interest in accession countries: Accessions at lowered conditions mean false incentives and program later problems, but insisting on high standards can frustrate the pro-EU faction and risks turning away from the accession project. In addition, there is the dilemma that the EU promotes democracy as a guarantor of political stability, but transitions to democracy lead through a phase of political instability. The problems are exacerbated by the entrenchment of sovereignism outside and inside the EU with hostile or cynical-utilitarian attitudes towards membership. Finally, accession in the context of war means either a strong NATO commitment or a de facto veto option for Russia. The consequence is that the prospect of accession to the EU, intended as support, leads to the perpetuation of war or the threat of war.

What follows from this? It would be important to take the time pressure out of the enlargement project and develop new ideas for shaping the EU's neighborhood. There is no point in continuing with the ENP. It would be far preferable to risk some at least discursive disruptions: Are there any states outside or even inside the EU that are showing signs of pushing themselves into the role of buffers? They should not be blamed for this but rather facilitated. One contribution to this would be to enhance the value of peacekeeping intermediary regions by linking them with benefits for them. The most important thing, however, is to take a realistic view of the dilemmas of further enlargement to the south and east and to communicate them openly. This alone will make some dilemmas less harmful. That is also the intention of this text. Enlargement will be a difficult but not impossible mission.

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