

REVIEW PAPER

REVITALISING EU ENLARGEMENT? A NEW DAWN IN EU ACCESSION POST-UKRAINE INVASION

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we compare the developments of the enlargement policy after Russia invaded Ukraine to the policy prior to the invasion covering the period after the Big Bang enlargement. The widening policy before the invasion was rather inefficient because the member states governments assessed the importance of institutional binding of new members disparately, which affected the aspiring countries, as the EU appeared to be indecisive regarding the accession of new states. The perception of an increased security threat, because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is likely to lead to a shift in the European Union's enlargement policy, including the demands for an institutional adjustment in the EU to increase its integration capacity and simplify the decision-making procedures. It is, however, questionable whether eventual institutional adjustments will produce desirable outcomes for the European Union because of the existence of different interests among the member states.

Keywords: EU Enlargement, Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, Reform of the EU



MAP SOCIAL SCIENCES

Volume 5

ISSN: 2744-2454/ © The Authors.
Published by **MAP** - Multidisciplinary
Academic Publishing.

Article Submitted: **08 June 2024**
Article Accepted: **15 July 2024**
Article Published: **16 July 2024**



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<https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2454.2024.5.27>



HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Makul A., Kalamujić Z. (2024). **Revitalising EU Enlargement? A New Dawn in EU Accession Post-Ukraine Invasion.** MAP Social Sciences, 5, 27-39.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.53880/2744-2454.2024.5.27>



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Introduction

The enlargement of the European Union is considered being the most successful foreign policy achievement of the European foreign policy, because of its transformative power that was able to bring states to adjust to European rules and norms. However, the dynamics of enlargement policy has been weakened after the latest enlargement rounds in the 2000s because of the need to adjust the political system of the EU to an increased number of states and the crises the EU was exposed to. Hence, the importance of the enlargement was not emphasised in the EU policy agenda and the question was moved aside.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, some changes in foreign policy have occurred, as EU member states have adopted stricter sanctions against Russia in a relatively short period, compared to previous sanctions after the illegal annexation of Crimea. In over two years, the Council of the EU has adopted fourteen packages of sanctions against Russia (The Council of the EU, 2024).

Besides the sanctions the EU imposed on Russia, the war in Ukraine has led to a change in the European Union's foreign policy toward the Western Balkans, which resulted in a more active approach. While there was a rhetorical shift by officials from the EU member states and the EU starting in 2017 regarding the countries that the EU perceives as competitors in the region by pointing out the possibility of losing impact on the region if the EU remains inactive (Euractiv, 2017; Juncker, 2017; Roth, 2018; Balkan: "Es Reicht Ein Streichholz," 2017) the Union's approach did not change substantially. The rhetorical shift was followed by the 2018 European Council summit in Sofia, in which the heads of the member states and governments reaffirmed their commitment to widening by emphasizing the geopolitical implications if the European Union does not act (European Council, 2018).

However, in the pre-invasion period, the political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina has deepened, and the relations between Serbia and Kosovo are on the constant verge of conflict, while Montenegro, the last decade's regional frontrunner in the integration process, has experienced a backsliding in the integration process due to the political crisis that has been caused by the change of the executive government in 2020 that led to a

deep societal polarization. The only success was the solving of the long-lasting dispute between Greece and North Macedonia regarding the name of the country, after which Greece gave its consent to start the accession negotiations. After solving the dispute, however, Bulgaria imposed additional conditions on North Macedonia before giving consent for the start of the negotiations talks.

At first, in the post-invasion period, the more active approach to the Kosovo and Serbia conflict have produced some visible results after the representatives of Kosovo and Serbia signaled, yet unwillingly, their readiness to agree on a long-term solution. Yet after the terrorist attack in Banjska, the relations between Kosovo and Serbia are backsliding. In addition, the EU granted candidate status to Moldova, Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Building on the aforementioned, this text examines the specific changes that have occurred in the EU's Enlargement policy as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and discusses the challenges associated with the new enlargement policy. In particular, the text examines whether the European Union is becoming a major power. The term "major power" is used to describe a political entity that possesses the necessary resources and capabilities to shape its foreign policy and exert significant influence on other nations. Furthermore, it is willing to employ its power to advance its agenda in other countries.

The perception of an increased security threat, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is likely to lead to a shift in the European Union's enlargement policy, including the demands for an institutional adjustment in the EU to increase its integration capacity and simplify the decision-making procedures regarding widening and other policy fields. It is, however, questionable whether eventual institutional adjustments will produce desirable outcomes for the European Union to increase its efficiency in the enlargement policy. The success of the European Union's foreign policy, and enlargement in particular, depends on policy convergence of the member states, even with simplified procedures. Some authors argue that reforming the decision-making procedures does not necessarily lead to an efficient enlargement policy, because the member states prioritize their self-interest (Börzel, 2023, p. 54). The European Union has yet to address the root causes of its

political transformation to become a major political power. However, the foreign policy, especially the enlargement policy, suggests a growing convergence of policies and points at a potential path towards a more effective foreign policy.

There has been a policy change that includes granting candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova in June 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022, and the Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. The perception of an increased security threat leads to a change in the enlargement policy. The geographic proximity of Ukraine to the European Union increases the perception of the threat. However, there were concrete outcomes in the relations between Serbia and Kosovo prior to the terrorist attack in Banjska village, despite the short time frame. Furthermore, the EU's decision to commence accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina can also be interpreted as tangible outcomes.

The European Union is likely to adjust its position depending on perceived threats to its security or interests, assuming all the member states reach a high level of policy convergence regarding enlargement. The higher the perceived threat, the more likely the possibility of a long-term policy change. Consequently, the longer the war in Ukraine lasts, the greater the possibility of a long-term policy change. The invasion of Ukraine is also used as an argument for advocating the amendment of the treaties to simplify the decision-making procedure in foreign policy matters to increase the Union's ability to act (e.g. Baerbock, 2023) which includes enlargement as well.

In general, a stronger role for the European Union in international politics would be in line with the self-proclaimed goal to increase its impact on the global stage as was announced in the 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, and the 2022 Strategic Compass.

In this article, we compare the developments of the enlargement policy in the post-invasion period to the enlargement policy prior to the invasion covering the period after the Big Bang enlargement in 2004. The widening policy before the invasion was rather inefficient because the member states governments assessed the importance of institutional binding of new members disparately, which affected the aspiring countries, as the EU appeared to be indecisive regarding the accession of new states. Because the widening process has stalled in the post-2004 period, the shift in 2017

came as a result of a perceived threat of external actors, which the Union perceives as a threat. A similar pattern, that is marked by an increased interest of the EU stakeholders in enlarging the Union, has occurred after the Russian invasion as well. Hence, due to the lack of a credible enlargement perspective, the potential member states were less motivated to continue a reform path.

By perceiving the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a critical juncture, the article analyses how a significant event, such as war, has an impact on subsequent political and institutional developments in the EU.

We will analyse official documents and reports of the European Union, such as Strategic Compass and the 2016 Global Strategy, enlargement strategies, and the Standard Eurobarometer, which we will use for the analysis. Furthermore, statements of EU and EU member state officials, official EU websites, and news websites are important sources of information that support some of the arguments made in the text. Academic texts regarding the EU enlargement policy are used as secondary sources in the text.

In the first section, we will analyse the shortcomings of the enlargement policy in the post-2004 period. The second part analyses the post-invasion enlargement policy. Its focus is on the new candidate states, Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Kosovo and Serbia relations. The reasons to focus only on part of the states are based on policy changes regarding these states as a consequence of the invasion, as most changes have been observable here, such as mediation in the negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo and granting candidate status to three new states. The space devotion is in favor of Serbia-Kosovo relations and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as these cases can provide more insights about the EU enlargement policy. Granting candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine in June 2022 provides little time to observe the efficiency of a new approach, yet it reveals a direction in which the EU intends to move. The fourth part will discuss the challenges within the EU in the post-invasion enlargement policy that is likely to have a constraining effect on the enlargement policy because of the diverging positions regarding institutional adjustments to increase the integration capacity of the EU. It analyses the conditions under which the EU enlargement policy is likely to provide more tangible results and enhance its ability to act and points out the challenges in the process.

The EU Enlargement Policy

The idea of a common European foreign and security policy was part of the integration project since its beginnings, but different initiatives failed due to rejections from individual member states (Bindi, 2009). The original six member states eventually agreed on the establishment of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) in 1970 as a platform for consultations in foreign policy matters. The EPC was the first step towards the creation of a common foreign policy, yet, without the obligation of the states to follow the agreed position. When the Single European Act came into force in 1986, the EPC was introduced in a treaty for the first time. However, the same logic of creating non-binding decisions was preserved. At later stages, during all treaty revisions, the common foreign and security policy was gradually developed into a more institutionalized matter, leading to the possibility of the creation of binding decisions. However, even with the creation of the CFSP, the decision-making process retained its strong intergovernmental character because of the obligation of a unanimous decision-making procedure, including during enlargement.

The enlargement policy is considered the most important foreign policy achievement of the European Union (Borrell, 2023, p. 201; Keil & Arkan, 2015, p. 4). This argument is based on the ability of the Union to exert its influence on other states, resulting in adjusted political systems to EU norms. The political transformations from a single party to multi-party political systems, achieved through a membership perspective, are used as examples of the most important European foreign policy achievement. However, the success of the EU in exerting its impact on potential member states depends strongly on a credible membership perspective (Börzel, Dimitrova, and Schimmelfennig, 2017).

Yet, the last more than a decade was marked by a hesitant position of the EU regarding enlargement. Such a position reflects the internal divisions among the EU member states with varying positions towards the Union expansion (e.g. Ker-Lindsay, 2017; Toegelhofer & Adebahr, 2017; Wunsch, 2017). The crises the EU coped with, such as the financial, economic, and political, have contributed to an increased Euroscepticism, which has affected the growing reluctance towards the acceptance of new member states, along with the already existing enlargement fatigue. In general, the conditions

for the acceptance of new member states have increased due to a more integrated Union (Vachudova, 2019, p. 66), and internal issues, both in the EU and the Western Balkans (Zhelyazkova et al., 2019). This development contradicts the previously assumed position, that was claimed in a speech by the former High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Paddy Ashdown, who said, "...when you join depends not so much on the EU, but on your own efforts and the pace at which you reform" (Ashdown, 2003). Consequently, the European position vis-à-vis enlargement has become weaker due to emerging difficulties within the Union. The success of the accession process has become more reliant on internal dynamics within the Union, while the performances of candidate states have remained the other crucial factor.

The last accession of a state in the European Union was in 2013 when Croatia became a member state. After the Croatian accession, the then-candidate for the Head of the Commission, Jean Claude Juncker, announced during the presentation of his program to the European Parliament in 2014 that the accession process would stall during his mandate.

The EU needs to take a break from enlargement so that we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28. This is why, under my Presidency of the Commission, ongoing negotiations will continue, and notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place over the next five years. With countries in our Eastern neighbourhood such as Moldova or Ukraine, we need to step up close cooperation, association and partnership to further strengthen our economic and political ties (Juncker, 2014, p. 11).

The Juncker announcement was based on the previous three enlargement rounds, starting with 2004, followed by 2007, and then 2013. Consequently, the 13 new member states increased the existing complexities in the decision-making process. In addition, the hesitant position of the Union regarding enlargement can also be explained by its assumption of the sufficiency of the formal membership perspective for the Western Balkan states. This is well illustrated by the fact that between 2014 and 2017, the enlargement of the European Union was not present on the agenda of the European Council (Elena, 2019). Furthermore, after the first Western Balkans Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the next summit devoted to the

enlargement of the Balkans states was organized 15 years later, in 2018, in Sofia. This indicates a more active approach of the EU because of the subsequent European Council meetings either dedicated to the enlargement (European Council, 2020) or by including enlargement on the agenda (e.g. European Council, 2022).

The EU Enlargement Policy after the Invasion

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine. The invasion, labeled as a “special military operation” by the Russian government, was the most recent attack on a sovereign state on European soil. It was a continuation of the military actions against Ukraine after the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and taking control over parts of the Donbas region. The response of the European Union, along with other Western countries, was to impose sanctions on Russia. These are targeted toward the Russian government, industry, and individuals with close ties to the political leadership (The Council of the EU, 2024). Imposing sanctions seeks to put pressure on the government and weaken Russia’s economic and military strength by disconnecting them from the global economy.

The significance of the European Union Enlargement Policy has become more salient after the invasion as a direct consequence of the war. Closer institutional cooperation with potential and candidate states will provide new impetus to the countries to fulfill the criteria for full membership in the Union and make them more resilient to Russian and other external impacts. One of the consequences of the invasion is an increase in the number of states that are accepted as potential member states of the Union.

First, contrary to Juncker’s announcement about the intentions to strengthen the cooperation with Eastern Partnership countries, Moldova and Ukraine, (Juncker, 2014, p. 11), the Council granted candidate status to these two countries in June 2022, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022, while Georgia is considered as a potential candidate country. Granting the candidate status to two countries that were not previously considered possible members of the EU indicates the changed approach to enlargement and underlines the importance of institutional binding to the Union. In this sense, the emphasis is put on security in the widening policy. However, the

focus on the “geopolitical stability” (Vachudova, 2019, p. 65) of the Western Balkans was also more pronounced before the invasion, compared to previous rounds in which the economic factors played a more important role.

Such a development represents a unique case in which two countries do not have control over the entire territory, and, yet, have become candidate countries, while Bosnia and Herzegovina did not fulfill the 14 criteria (European Commission, 2019) required to get the candidate status granted. However, in 2023, the members of the ruling parties started the negotiations to align with the priorities that the EU has defined as crucial, even though the results are largely modest, while in some areas there is backsliding, such as criminalizing defamation in the entity Republika Srpska which is likely to affect the work of civil society organizations and media (Delegation of the European Union in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023). The decision to grant the candidate status indicates the adjusted policy of the Union to new challenges. The fear of losing impact in the Balkans, and the incentive to reform have prompted the EU to act.

A serious limitation for Ukraine to adjust to accession criteria is posed by the war and the occupation of significant parts of the country by Russia. The focus of the government is to reclaim its territory and take over control over the entire country, which puts the accession policy lower on a priority list. Furthermore, Russian control over Transnistria limits the Moldovan attempts to reform. In addition, the political dispute between the pro-Russian and pro-European forces deepened the existing crisis in the small country. This issue will likely be present in the following years. The two examples of countries that are not controlling their entire territory represent a novelty in the EU enlargement policy, which will force the Union to develop a new approach. Despite these issues, the European Commission recommended starting the accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova (European Commission, 2023a, pp. 21–22).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the candidate status did not help to solve the political disputes that had existed for years, even though the government has made some progress (European Commission, 2023a, p. 7) and recommended starting the accession negotiations in March 2024, but they did not start although Bosnia and Herzegovina got a conditional green light for the start of the accession negotiations. Such development is partly due to the

appeasement policy of the Western actors in the last more than a decade because the international actors have adjusted their policies to the demands of the political elites rather than exerting pressure on these elites (Freyburg and Richter, 2010). The Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and BiH has given the EU the interpretative authority over the proposed and implemented policies in Bosnia. However, this approach is seldom used to exert more pressure on domestic political elites, even though there have been examples in the past, and a more active approach may produce some negative outcomes (e.g. Keil, 2013, p. 349).

Furthermore, the inability of Western actors to agree on how to support Bosnia and Herzegovina in its efforts to fulfil the accession criteria and help the country enhance its functionality poses an additional issue. The decision regarding the changes of the Election Law of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina Christian Schmidt was openly supported by the US and UK governments, while the EU Delegation underscored that the decision was "of the High Representative alone" (NI, 2022), which shows diverging policies between these actors. Such development points out the intergovernmental character of the Western approach to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans in general.

The secessionist policy of Milorad Dodik continued after Bosnia and Herzegovina became a candidate country for EU membership. In January 2023, Dodik honoured Russian President Vladimir Putin with the Order of the Republika Srpska, the highest order of that entity. Hence, there is a strong impact from Russian political elites on some of the political actors in Bosnia, which can be attributed to perceived close ties between ethnic Serbs and Russians. In addition to existing ties, an important factor that contributes to closer cooperation is based upon the fact that Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and offers international protection (Bechev, 2017). Russia successfully blocked the attempts of Kosovo to become a member of the United Nations by supporting the policy of non-recognition and backing the Serbian position in the dispute. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia supports the political leadership in the entity Republika Srpska by aiding the entity leadership and policies that increase existing ethnic polarization, while the country undermines the efforts in Montenegro to reach the EU standards.

The post-invasion period did not witness an increase in the efficiency of the European Union enlargement policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. This statement must be read with caution, considering the relatively short duration since the candidate status was granted. The sole responsibility, however, does not rest entirely on external actors, primarily the European Union, but must also be attributed to domestic political elites, who are unwilling to find a common solution on how to fulfil the requirements for EU membership.

Second, the relations between Kosovo and Serbia are on the constant verge of conflict. Yet, the German and French proposal for the normalization of the relations between Serbia and Kosovo, under the EU leadership, has provided some tangible results. The two sides agreed in February 2023 on EU Proposal – Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia, followed by a meeting in March in which the implementation Annex was agreed upon (EEAS, 2023a). Although the Serbian and Kosovo representatives have declared that the Agreement was not reached yet because they did not sign it, European and US officials underline that the signature of the document is unnecessary, and the agreement is considered valid. The achievements were, however, short-lived as the withdrawal of ethnic Serbs from the Kosovo institutions in the northern part of the country caused an institutional crisis, while at the same time, the central Kosovar government was never legitimized by the Serbs. The terrorist attack on 24 September 2023 of the nationalist Serbs from Northern Kosovo has further hampered the attempts to reach an agreement. As a result, the European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the attack and calling for sanctions on Serbia (European Parliament, 2023). Both sides have continued the talks under the leadership of Italian, French, the German heads of state and governments, however, without making any significant progress in the matter (EEAS, 2023b).

Both sides in the negotiation process were exposed to a vast amount of pressure from the EU and the US to accept the Agreement. At the same time, the representatives are exposed to internal pressures not to make any concessions to the other side. Protests in the Serbian capital Belgrade were a frequent occurrence, led by extreme nationalist parties claiming that the Agreement is a betrayal because it recognizes Kosovo as an independent state (Reuters, 2023), while the members of the Kosovar opposition party PSD threw a cake and a milkshake at the Kosovar chief negotiator Besnik

Bislimi because of the acceptance to form the Community of Serb Municipalities on Kosovo (NI, 2023). The internal pressures increase the domestic costs for the negotiators, which might weaken their domestic position and increase the risk of instabilities within their respective countries. On the other hand, the deadlock in the Serbian EU integration process does not exert significant pressure on decision-makers to align with the accession criteria. Only 34 percent of Serbian citizens believe that EU membership for the economy would be a positive development (Regional Cooperation Council, 2023). According to the same report, most Western Balkan countries have a favorable view of economic membership. Bosnia and Herzegovina has the second lowest level of support, primarily due to divergent positions in its two entities. Previous polls suggest that support for EU membership in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is considerably higher compared to the Republika Srpska (Čaršimamović Vukotić et al., 2017, p. 17).

In addition, Western actors have repeatedly urged Serbia to align its foreign policy with the EU by imposing sanctions on Russia (e.g. European Parliament, 2022a). The demands for Serbian alignment with the EU foreign and security policy had been stated also before the invasion, but the underlying pressure was not strong enough to move Serbia to a policy change, although, there have been calls by members of the Serbian executive government to follow the EU policy. Such an outcome is attributed to the appeasement approach of Western actors toward Serbia because of the assumption that not exerting too much political pressure on Serbia would cause the alignment with the dominant Western positions.

The persistence of Serbia to sit on “two chairs”, as the Serbian approach is often described because of balancing between the East and the West, is based on internal pressures due to a large number of Serbian citizens expressing their sympathies with Russia and the Russian support of Serbia in the Kosovo case. European Union’s inability to impose its will on Serbia regarding the foreign policy alignment can be attributed to the institutional architecture of the EU and the existence of the joint decision trap in foreign policy matters (Scharpf, 1988).

Compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina, the pressure the EU has exerted on Serbia and Kosovo has provided some tangible results, as they have

reached an Agreement that was created by France and Germany, and officially presented and mediated by the EU. The Union has exposed some of its potential regarding Kosovo’s and Serbia’s process of normalization. The reached agreement has become part of Chapter 35 in the negotiations and will become a formal part of the accession process. However, the above-mentioned terrorist attack has reduced the potential to reach a long-term agreement.

Future Challenges to EU Enlargement Policy

The success of the enlargement policy of the European Union will depend on two factors. These two factors are closely interrelated, as a stricter EU policy on potential member states is more likely to produce tangible results. The first one relates to the ability of the potential member states to fulfil the accession criteria, while the second one depends on the ability of the European Union to keep the given promises.

For example, Dutch and French rejections in 2018 to give consent to start the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania after North Macedonia changed its name (Politico, 2018) have damaged the credibility of the EU. This is underlined by the fact that French President Emmanuel Macron has previously encouraged North Macedonia to change its name. The second factor involves also the simplification of the decision-making procedure in the European Union by abandoning the requirement of unanimous voting in the Council in foreign policy matters and enlargement, while also achieving high-level policy convergence.

The idea of the amendments of the treaty changes did not emerge after the invasion. During the German election campaign in 2021, the parties proposed the introduction of the majority voting system in the Council regarding foreign and security policy (CDU/CSU, 2021, p. 20; Die Gruene, 2021, p. 213; SPD, 2021, p. 135). The Greens and CDU/CSU are more explicit when linking the need to “deepen before widening”. Linking institutional reforms to the accession of new countries represents a novelty in the German approach to enlargement. Prior to this new approach, the German government emphasized the necessity of fulfilling the accession criteria including conditionality (Toeglhofer & Adebahr, 2017).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine serves as an argument to advocate for treaty changes (e.g. Baerbock, 2023). The broad agreement among German parties suggests that the enlargement policy is dependent on the reform of the EU because they perceive the principle of unanimous voting as the major obstacle to having a more efficient foreign policy. The idea of changing the Treaties to introduce majority voting instead of a unanimous decision-making process is a consequence of learned lessons because any future increase in numbers with the existing procedures would result in a more complex Union. The European Parliament supports the idea of a Treaty change (European Parliament, 2022b), and Head of the Commission Ursula von der Layen, and French President Emmanuel Macron after the Conference on the Future of the EU in May 2022, and the High Commissioner for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell who wrote that:

In June, the European Council decided that the future of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia lies within the EU. It also reaffirmed the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans. But an enlarged EU must have the capacity to act. In my view, this means reducing the scope of the unanimity rule in foreign and security policy and other areas (Borrell, 2023, p. 201).

Such development, however, bears the risk of increased invisibility of smaller EU member states in foreign policy and, more importantly, it leads to a loss of a tool that is used as a bargaining leverage of smaller states. The sanctions relating to the ban on oil exports were substantially weakened because of the concessions made to Hungary.

The intergovernmental character of the Council would diminish to a large extent, which is a risk worthy of taking for the governments that support the Treaty changes. Yet, the Treaty reform could help overcome the formal limitations in some member states that express their hesitations regarding enlargement, such as France. French constitution contains a provision for holding a referendum regarding the expansion that can be overridden if three-fifths of members of both houses of the parliament vote for the inclusion of the country into the EU (Wunsch, 2017, p. 545). The election results in 2024 of the far right and

Euroscptic Rassemblement National (former National Front), both at the European and national level, reduce the capacities of the pro-European forces to follow a more active enlargement policy, also because the party has declared its opposition to accept any new countries in the EU.

Under the current formal requirements, the threshold for the acceptance of new member states remains high, considering the low support among French citizens for enlargement and the hesitant support for the expansion of French political elites throughout the history of the EU (Krotz & Schild, 2013, p. 152; Lippert, 2007, p. 428; Schimmelfennig, 2005, p. 144).

As a response to von der Layen and Macron's support for treaty amendments, 13 states have submitted an open letter in which they express their disagreement with the idea of treaty changes by pointing out "how much the EU can deliver within the current Treaty framework," by using the examples of COVID and Russian sanctions.¹ Another group of six, of which five are the founding states and Spain, (excluding France), submitted a non-paper in which the representatives underscored that "We remain in principle open to necessary treaty changes that are jointly defined."² However, France should also be included in the second group, as France had a rotating Presidency during the submission, and it wanted to retain a neutral position (Lehne, 2022). The diverging positions among the member states indicate that reaching an agreement will pose a difficult task.

In August 2023, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, mentioned 2030 as a possible year for enlargement (Politico, 2023) and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell repeated the statement, although the Commission rejected the mentioning of a concrete accession data. The different positions point to a disagreement and reversal between the two institutions. In 2018, the Commission's enlargement strategy envisaged membership by 2025 (European Commission, 2018), with the European Council opposing a precise indication of the year of accession (European Council, 2018). The existing divergence contributes to the EU's lack of credibility during its efforts to present itself

1 Non-paper by Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Sweden on the outcome of and follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe, available at: https://www.europa-nu.nl/9353000/1/j4nvih7l3kb9lrw_j9vvj9idsj04xr6/vlsthlp5intb/f=/non_paper.pdf

2 Non-paper submitted by Germany, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Spain on implementing the proposals of the Plenary of the "Conference on the Future of Europe", available at: <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2022D20911&did=2022D20911>

as a unified actor and testifies to an inconsistency in enlargement policy. Moreover, in September 2023, the Franco-German working group on the EU Institutional Reform (2023) presented a report that suggests amendments to the Lisbon Treaty to exclude provisions regarding unanimous voting procedures in enlargement matters and proposed a more emphasized differentiated integration, by mentioning the year 2030 as a possible for the accession of new states. Differentiated integration position reflects the position of French President Macron (2017) who presented it in a speech during the first year of his mandate.

Publicly announcing the possible accession date is likely to increase the underlying pressure from the acceding states on the European Union to conform to its promises. The European Union went through a similar scenario regarding the 2004 enlargement (e.g. Schimmelfennig, 2005).

The conditions within the EU for a more active enlargement policy have become more favorable in the more recent period, as data from public opinion polls suggest. The results of the public opinion polls reduce the pressure on decision-makers to follow their goals, considering the increased support among EU citizens for following the expansion policy, compared to previous years. According to the most recent Eurobarometer reports, more than 50% of EU citizens support the enlargement, of which in only three states – Germany, France, and Austria – the opposition to enlargement is greater than the support (European Commission, 2023c, p. 60, 2023d, p. 168). At the same time, the EU's response to the invasion of Ukraine found sound support among its citizens (European Commission, 2023c, p. 98). The most recent report suggests that the support for the accession of new states is 51%, while the 38% oppose such policy. In addition, Belgium currently has a one percent difference between opposition and support, as reported by the European Commission (2024, p. 154), in addition to the three previously mentioned states. Supportive public opinion suggests that political stakeholders have been able to successfully communicate how institutionalization might decrease future threats and make an enlarged European Union more resilient.

However, the volatility of public opinion polls is a double-edged sword as the opinion of the people might change depending on the information

they receive (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). The findings in the previous report suggested that the support in 2022 was 57% with Austria and France as the only states in which the support for enlargement was lower compared to those who oppose the widening (European Commission, 2022, p. 131). For example, the support for enlargement in 2011 was 36%, while the percentage of those who opposed the further expansion of the Union was 53% (e.g. European Commission, 2011, p. 82) when the crises in the EU reached their peak.

Besides the increased ability to act in the European Union, the success of the EU in foreign and security policy depends on its self-perception as a major player on a global stage. Such self-perception has been included in the EU Security Compass that was adopted in March 2021. The High Commissioner for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, underscores the importance of "learning to speak the language of power" (EEAS, 2022, p. 6). However, the EU citizens are not fully convinced of the European international influence either. According to the results of a report, European citizens assign a greater influence in the world to the USA, China, and Russia, than to the European Union (European Commission, 2023b, pp. 6–9).

Although the draft of the Compass had been prepared before the invasion, the Russian attack prompted the EU to include the war in the document and to state its security policy until 2030. Borrell writes in the foreword of the document that the major difference from previous documents is the commitment to regularly review and implement agreed policies (EEAS, 2022, p. 7). It is also noteworthy to look at the following Borrell citation, as it reveals the perception of other foreign policy documents of the EU.

"The history of European integration is full of plans and initiatives to strengthen the EU's security and defence policy. Most have come and gone. Therefore, sometimes people ask me why this time should be any different" (EEAS, 2022, p. 7). This statement summarizes well the perception of external actors of the EU's foreign and security policy, but also the perception from within. The intention to have a greater impact on a global stage has been often expressed (e.g. EEAS, 2016), yet success lagged often behind the ambition.

Conclusion

This text aimed to examine how the European Union enlargement policy changed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The argument was made that there was a change in enlargement policy, which is an integral part of the foreign and security policy, whose success depends on achieving high-level policy convergence among the member states, even if the EU member states are able to agree on Treaty adjustments. The security factor, although present before regarding the Western Balkans, has become more pronounced as a direct consequence of the war. These changes, however, have not resulted in a more successful outcome equally applying to all states in the integration process. Despite some hesitant member states regarding enlargement, the EU broadened the list of countries as potential members of the EU to Eastern Partnership countries (Belarus not included) by granting the candidate status to two of them, Ukraine and Moldova, and to Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country that is considered as a future EU member state since the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council Summit. This development could be seen as the starting point for a process that enables the European Union to utilize more of its potential and improve its foreign policy efficiency.

The diverging statements regarding the accession date between the Commission and the European Council representatives have exposed the inconsistencies in the enlargement policies, which might be interpreted as the lack of a plan on how to proceed with the enlargement policy.

Reaching the Agreement between Kosovo and Serbia and the subsequent Annex has proven to be the most important change in the post-invasion period until the terrorist attack. Furthermore, the decision to allow Bosnia and Herzegovina to start the accession negotiations serves as another example of a limited success, as Bosnian political elites have been able to agree on some important legal changes. However, the European Union has lowered its demands towards the accession countries due to the assumption that an institutional binding will serve as an incentive to intensify the reform in the process of adjusting to European rules and norms. The case of Serbia might serve as an exception, as there is an increased pressure from the EU and individual member states to align with EU policies. It was likely to lead to more stable relations at a governmental level, but with the potential for instability within the countries caused

by the opposition. This particular case emphasizes the Union's capacity to enhance its influence in expansion, provided that the underlying initiative encounters no opposition within the Union.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be considered a success story to a full extent because the EU policy patterns that existed before did not change substantially. However, the short period since the granting of the candidate status did not allow for a more efficient policy. An existing pattern is also observable in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the political elites are unwilling to fulfill the requirements to advance in the accession process, despite the adoption of some laws that have been defined as crucial by the EU, and the present issues have proven to be persistent.

The formalization of the ambition to be a global power in the Strategic Compass represents a continuation of the previous intentions of the European Union to achieve the proclaimed goal. However, the main limitations of the EU in foreign policy are caused by the principle of the unanimous decision-making procedure and the diverging interests of the member states. These factors are the main obstacles for the Union to have a more successful enlargement policy.

Hence, as long as the existing rules are applied, the European Union will face a challenge during the decision-making process, including during enlargement. Furthermore, the data from public opinion polls might seem surprising, considering that the support for enlargement has increased compared to previous years, but the ability of EU and member state officials to provide relevant information to citizens has contributed to the support.

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