

Europe Must Seize this Opportunity to Enlarge – and Reform

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For more than a decade, the once-radiant instrument of EU enlargement seemed to have lost its popular appeal and was put on the shelf. Mantra-like repetitions of political declarations and empty rhetoric about enlargement only led to fatigue and even further into a technocratic impasse. The European Union pretended it wanted to enlarge, while the countries of the Western Balkans simulated reforms. The result was a standstill.

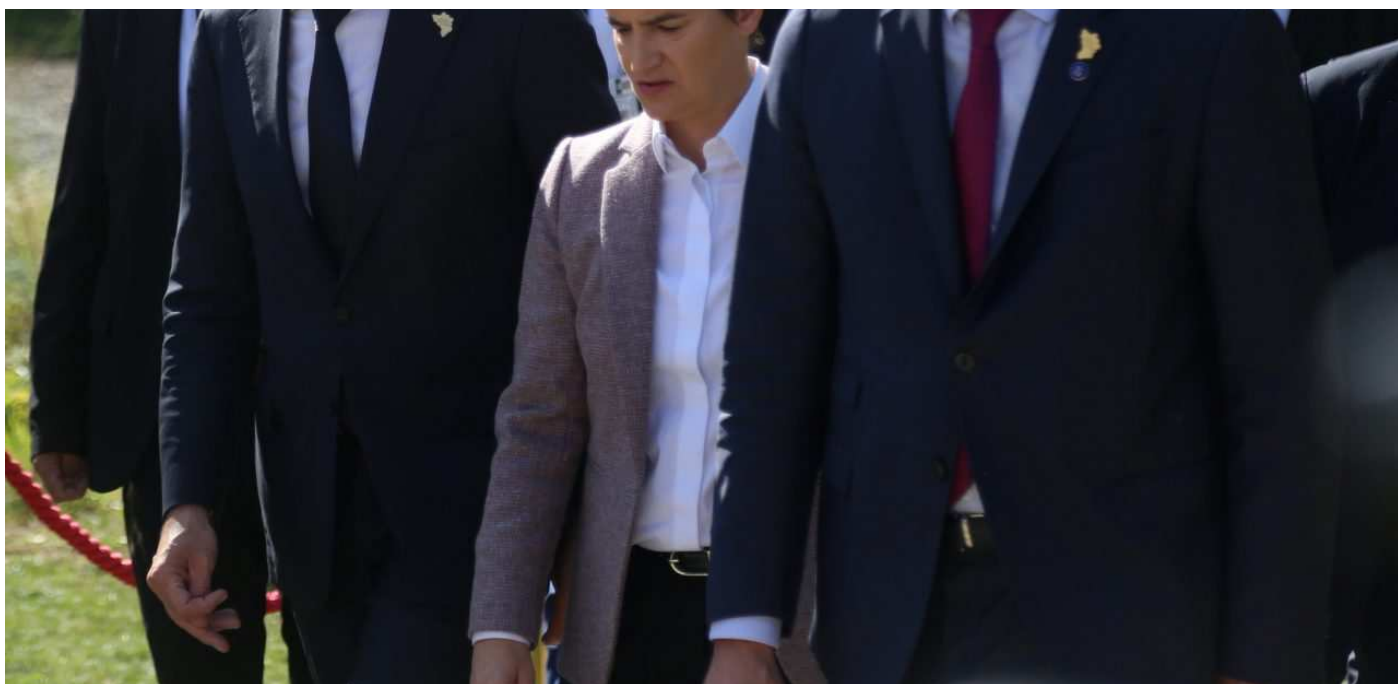
Then came the Russian attack on Ukraine, a dramatic moment for Europe and, as it seems, a new lease of life for EU enlargement. The political momentum and interest in enlargement are now back, and a window of opportunity for not only enlarging but also fundamentally reforming the Union is wide open.

Only weeks ago, while the debate was gaining in speed and substance, Europe was on the brink of another armed conflict in the Western Balkans, triggered by a military attack by a Serbian paramilitary group in Kosovo with obvious ties to an official EU candidate country, Serbia. In January 2024, it will be ten years since EU accession negotiations opened with Belgrade. Paradoxically, since then, the country headed by President Aleksandar Vucic, has joined the list of the ten most autocratic countries globally. Today's Serbia is a warning of what may happen if one doesn't speak the truth to power, and neither the EU nor this candidate country are taking the process of negotiating EU accessions seriously.

Ivan Krastev, one of the sharpest minds analyzing Central and Eastern European realities, put his finger on the point, stating that it is not enough for Europe to wake up to a new geopolitical reality. You also have to get out of bed and make use of this wind of political change. If we don't seize the opportunities in front of us, the tide may turn quicker than we think once the massive wave of public support for nationalistic forces in Europe translates into new government formations and Donald Trump, or his ideology, celebrates its return.

Target dates are not enough





The Netherlands Prime Minister Mark Rutte (left), Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic (centre) and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez (right) arrive ahead of the Berlin Process – Leaders’ Summit in Tirana, Albania, October 16 2023. Photo: EPA-EFE/MALTON DIBRA

What needs to be done? First, the EU needs to get its act together and undertake serious and far-fetched reforms. It is not enough to name possible target dates for the next round of EU enlargement, as Charles Michel, the president of the European Council, has done. Yes, political dynamics push the Union towards enlargement; it has become a geopolitical imperative. However, the devil lies in the detail, and enlargement is not only driven by foreign and security policy concerns but also entails a strong economic, financial, and social dimension. That is why the European Commission proposed to review all policy areas and make them ready for a bigger and better Union. This is why it is paramount to include the EU candidate countries in the yearly Rule of Law Monitoring of the EU already at an early stage.

However, institutional questions are the easier exercise. The sheer size of a possible next enlargement, with nine countries, in particular with Ukraine currently fighting for its existence, has no comparison. Next to the special security dimension, we should not neglect the huge economic differences between the EU-27 and the current candidate countries; the nine potential new member states all belong to the ten poorest countries in Europe. Once tough questions of competition or the future financing of the EU are on the table, negotiations and political decisions will naturally become more complicated.

Don’t forget the young, they’re the future





Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama (right) and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (left) arrive ahead of the Berlin Process – Leaders' Summit in Tirana, Albania, October 16 2023. Photo: EPA-EFE/MALTON DIBRA

Besides internal EU dilemmas and necessary reforms, one important task for the Union is to intensify and widen its networks and partnerships in the candidate countries. Closer cooperation with civil society and pro-European and emancipatory grassroots movements would indeed be a welcome and a much-needed help to boost democratization from below. Frontloading some of the tangible economic and social benefits and an early, gradual integration into the single market could give new hope and perspective to the people, improving the quality of their lives. More attention should be given to the dreams and needs of the next generation in the candidate countries – young Europeans. They are the core constituency of the future Union, and it is them we have to inspire for our common European objectives. In the end, it will be on them to secure internal democratic reforms and, with their passion and engagement, to help hinder state capture by a still too often corrupt political elite.

Most importantly, all candidate countries and potential future members of the Union have to show and prove serious commitments to European values and their own European ambitions. The EU and all its member states have to raise their voices and take a clear and unequivocal stance vis-à-vis volatile political systems see-sawing between Moscow and Beijing, such as Serbia, or with Georgia, still eyeing Russian support and proving the case in point. In the end, EU enlargement is and shall never be a process for the sake of political elites but for the benefit of the people. We must not forget what stands behind the idea of EU enlargement: it is the Union's core idea to promote European values, human rights, rule of law, and liberal and democratic societies, which apply to all, including, of course, the candidate countries.

A test as big as German reunification

To get enlargement back on track, we need a new set of rules, putting the functioning of the Union on a stable footing and making it ready to successfully integrate new members. But do we have the political strength and will in all EU capitals to take this path? The next few months will tell us whether the EU is able to prove that it understands realpolitik and, in particular, geopolitics. There will be no enlargement without internal reform. The next enlargement, with Ukraine as the core country, would change the Union in a way maybe only comparable to German reunification or the 2004 “big bang” Eastern Enlargement.

The Western Balkans are the litmus test for the art of the possible. Not succeeding in a region, where the Union has invested so much is not an option. Failure in the Western Balkans would only make everything much more difficult – for the whole of Europe.

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Paul Schmidt https://www.oegfe.at/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/OEGfE_Schmidt_2018_02-1-739x1024.jpg

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