

The Scramble for re-Enlargement: Montenegro

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Anecdotal evidence suggests that the policy of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans has not produced significant results in bringing the region closer to the EU and its core values. The strict and dry insistence on credible criteria and "fundamentals first" has distanced the region from the EU, where the significant European demands placed on a poor region, that has experienced all the troubles of state disintegration, civil war, sanctions, and isolation, have been too difficult and almost unachievable. Such a policy has developed a feeling of mistrust in the region towards the intentions of the EU, which has been exploited by both domestic politicians and contemporary geopolitical competitors such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has contributed to the reevaluation of the re-enlargement process in the EU, highlighting the importance of the process and its contribution to the peace and stability of the European continent. It appears that the existing enlargement toolbox is not efficient any more.

Rethinking enlargement requires more gradualism (differentiation)

The war in Ukraine has created a momentum to speed up the enlargement process, but the process definitely needs innovations and adjustments. In redesigning the Enlargement policy, the policies of global competitive players in the regions should be taken in account, as well as the expectations of the acceding countries and the prospects of real progress in the medium to long term.

. Even though it is a demographically and economically small region compared to the EU, the lag behind EU standards is quite substantial among the Western Balkan countries, and that lag is even greater in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Some countries, like Montenegro could potentially fulfill the conditions for membership relatively easily and quickly, and certainly more easily than some other candidate countries, if there were strong political will on both sides.

The differentiated policy approach means that countries should not participate in all EU policies in the same capacity. Montenegro could participate in those policies that are relevant to its interests and its level of development, at least to begin with. At a time of geopolitical tension, the priority policies would seem to be foreign policy/security and the internal market. Instead of waiting for years, or even decades, to implement all the necessary reforms, the candidate country might become involved in EU policies and the system from a very early phase. This would bring Montenegro closer to Brussels and the member states, and introduce more dynamics into the process.

Faster and a citizen-oriented process as a necessity

period. Speeding up enlargement is even more necessary for the success of the process and the ability to build the stronger commitment of candidate countries towards the process of EU integration, while also strengthening the EU as the dominant political and economic force. Based on the results of public opinion surveys 54.7 percent of people believe that the pace is more slow than fast, published by the agency DeFacto, in December, 2022, With increasing global

competition among important players in regions, such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, the EU should be aware that the complicated EU institutional structure and decision-making process does not contribute to its regional/global competitiveness. Maybe the EU could take decision making pattern from organizations like IMF and World Bank, where membership is global.

A citizen-centred enlargement process is crucial to its success. Independent and economically self-sustained voters should be considered the most important engine of positive dynamic changes in the political and economic system. The enlargement process needs crucial change in the accession countries. The engine of that change is, as always, the citizens, as voters – they are the ultimate corrective force. Therefore, citizens of accession countries want to see the very clear and practical benefits of EU enlargement, such as: new business and employment opportunities, educational opportunities, better infrastructure (roads, bridges, highways, medical centers, and power infrastructure).; this is something that the other geopolitical actors and competitors in the region understand very well.

What Can Be Done? Some Recommendations

Montenegro is the frontrunner and the most advanced candidate country when it comes to progress in the accession negotiations with the European Commission

- However, it is important to make enlargement a successful EU policy, again- a policy that will deliver, in the new circumstances. In that regard, the enlargement policy has to become more flexible and faster than it used to be. In addition, it should become more inclusive, with the active, bolder practical involvement of the accession countries, to embed core EU values and build strong institutions in candidate countries. In the same vein, we are aware that expecting the EU to lower the bar, by developing a more flexible enlargement approach, is not an easy policy choice, but it is of the utmost importance, as a productive long term investment in democracy and the rule of law, core EU values. Some specific recommendations include the following:
- The Montenegrin authorities should rely on the stronger and early/prompt involvement/mediation/ engagement of the EU on issues that are holding back the accession process. Given that the EU strongly advises that the absolute priority in accession activities remains the fulfilment of the remaining interim benchmarks in Chapters 23- Judiciary and fundamental rights and 24-Justice, Freedom and security and the application of the Action Plan to address the main EC recommendations, the government of Montenegro should rely on the democratic and institutional capacity of the EU in resolving multiannual stagnation and inertia for the overall accession progress.
- , Montenegrin authorities should respond by accountable negotiation structure with independent, merit-based professionals, whilst creating tangible fulfillment plans starting from low hanging fruit issues to more complex one.
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- In order to incentivise candidate states and drive enlargement enthusiasm in those countries, the EU should consider allowing access (at least temporarily) to the critical EU infrastructures to the institutions of the candidate countries that are meeting and/or are nearly meeting the EU Acquis criteria.
- For example, providing for the temporary and conditional access of Montenegro (as a country with the Euro as its official currency) to various financial mechanisms would significantly assist in resolving issues during an exogenous and symmetric crisis (such as Covid 19 or the current energy crisis). In the same vein, the authorities would be subjected to similar fiscal surveillance and coordination mechanisms to those for EMU members.
- As another example, the national banks of numerous candidate countries, including the Central Bank of Montenegro, are very close to fulfilling the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) requirements. By allowing temporary SEPA access or the usage of the TARGET instant payment settlement (TIPS) infrastructure for cross border payments among countries in the WB6, the EU would strengthen the Berlin Process in the WB, while citizens would have an access to a direct measurable benefit (cheaper cross border payments). The practical advantages of conditional and/or temporary SEPA access would create an accountability pressure from the public (voters) on the governments to accelerate EU enlargement.
- Synergy and leverage between the EU accession negotiation process and arrangements/cooperation with international financial institutions in candidate countries could contribute to the acceleration of critical reforms. The World Bank Country Partnership Frameworks, IMF programmes, and EBRD operations, which are widely used in the region, are excellent tools that could be used to integrate EU requirements as prior actions, structural benchmarks, accelerating structural reforms, reflecting key EU core values. For example, the reform package, prepared with local, EU and US expertise, supported by the IMF which aimed to remove corrupt judges, as happened in Albania in 2016, is a positive example.
- Re-establish country level enlargement offices equipped with the enough capacities to closely follow candidate countries. Montenegro has observed a palpable decrease in the quality of communication with the relevant enlargement bodies (DGFISMA, DGNEAR, DGEFCFIN) since the merger of the Montenegro and Serbia office. We firmly believe that especially candidate countries that are pushing forward in the negotiation process should have individual and close contact with the relevant EC bodies.
- The EU/EC should re-examine quantifying the progress of the candidate countries in the country Progress Reports, highlighting and clearly separating those institutions that are leading the process from those that are contributing to stagnation. The Progress Reports of the candidate countries are usually subject to the subjective assessments of the press, the Parliament, the government, and other key stakeholders. In order to streamline the messaging and to spur motivation and the accountability of the institutions in candidate countries, in each Progress Report, one page could be dedicated to a list of the institutions that made the most of the progress in comparison to the institutions which stagnated.

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