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Building a Geopolitical European Union After Russia's Attack on Ukraine: The Valuable Tool of Enlargement

Abstract

Russia's attack on Ukraine is a watershed moment that forced the EU to confront its weaknesses and reshuffle its priorities. In this context, the war brought back at the top of the EU's agenda the enlargement process. In light of these developments, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the impact of the war on the EU's enlargement process and to demonstrate that enlargement policy has acquired a greater geopolitical value than ever before. The paper begins with a historical overview of the challenges that have defined the enlargement process and have led to a deadlock, demonstrating that the war can provide impetus for the revival of the stagnant enlargement process. The discussion proceeds, in turn, to the pros and cons of further expansion of the EU. A pro-enlargement position is adopted, arguing that enlargement is a valuable tool for the transformation of the Union into a real geopolitical actor. Finally, the paper builds upon the previous analysis and proposes ways of adjusting the enlargement process to the new challenges created by the war. To conclude, the paper argues that Russia's aggression can reinvigorate the enlargement process, which in turn can strengthen the EU's role on the geopolitical chessboard. The stakes are too high and the EU cannot afford to lose the momentum.

Keywords: Treaty on European Union, Article 49, Enlargement Process, Accession, Qualified Majority Voting, Russia, Ukraine, War, Western Balkans

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a turning point in the European history. It has violently woken up the European Union (EU), forcing it to rethink and readjust its role in a rapidly changing and hostile international environment. The new geopolitical arena that has just started to emerge requires nothing less than a U-turn: the EU's transformation into a real geopolitical actor.

However, building a geopolitical EU is not an easy task, considering that the Union's *modus operandi* is quite unsuited for this role. Thus, the EU must take advantage of all the available tools that can be used to support this tricky transformation. One of these valuable tools is the EU's enlargement policy which also needs to be re-evaluated in order to be fit for the new realities faced by Europe.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the impact of the war on the EU's enlargement process and to demonstrate that enlargement policy has acquired a greater geopolitical value than ever before.

In order to meet this aim, this paper is divided into three parts. The first part provides a historical overview of the challenges that have defined the enlargement process and have led to a deadlock, demonstrating that the war can provide impetus for the revival of the stagnant enlargement process. The second part discusses the pros and cons of further expansion of the Union. A pro-enlargement position is adopted, arguing – among others – that enlargement is a valuable tool for the transformation of the EU into a real geopolitical actor. Part three highlights that, if the EU wants to withstand the storms of a rapidly changing and hostile international environment it needs to readjust its enlargement process.

The significance of the above analysis can be understood if one considers that what is at stake is Europe's own future as well as the rules-based international order.

Historical Background

Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which provides the legal basis for EU accession, stipulates that any European country may apply to join the Union if it respects its common values laid down in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them. These common values include human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

Guided by these European values and subject to strict conditions, enlargement was once heralded as one of the EU's most powerful policy

tools. Unfortunately, however, it has stalled since the accession of Croatia in 2013.

This stalemate was a result of a lack of progress of reforms in the candidate countries, but also a lack of political will on the side of the EU, which found itself preoccupied with a poly-crisis: the protracted economic crisis, the rise of extremism, illiberalism and populism, the migration/ refugee crisis, Brexit, and the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic were unprecedented challenges that distracted the Union from its enlargement agenda, forcing it to turn inwards. In these circumstances, fifty years of enlargement have ended up to a gridlock.

The Western Balkans as an Example of Stagnation in the Enlargement Process

The stagnation of the EU enlargement process can be clearly demonstrated if one examines the Western Balkan's rocky road towards EU membership. The countries of this vulnerable region have been stuck in the Union's waiting room for too long.

For instance, North Macedonia was granted candidate status in 2005, but the enlargement process was hijacked several times by individual Member States. Initially, the opening of accession negotiations was blocked by Greece due to a name dispute which was eventually resolved in 2018 via the Prespa Agreement. But North Macedonia's path was once again blocked by France until the new enlargement methodology was agreed.[1] It was then Bulgaria that further hampered the start of the accession talks. The Bulgarian veto had nothing to do with the economic and democratic principles that govern the EU enlargement process (Cvijić, Nechev, 2022). Instead, it concerned a linguistic and historical dispute with North Macedonia. The dispute also blocked Albania's bid, since the EU had grouped both countries together in their accession applications. Only after North Macedonia resolved the dispute with Bulgaria did it receive the green light to start accession negotiations on 18 July 2022. The example of North Macedonia's (and Albania's) bid demonstrates the Achille's heel of the enlargement project: individual Member States can hijack the process in order to promote their national agendas (Dionysiou, 2022).

Montenegro and Serbia, on the other hand – which are considered as the frontrunners of the Western Balkans enlargement process (Cancela, Lamoso, 2020, p. 4) – have been negotiating since 2012 and 2014,

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[1] France alone blocked North Macedonia, but was joined by Denmark and the Netherlands in opposing Albania's bid (Gotev, 2019).

respectively. In February 2018, the Commission issued a Communication, in which it declared that with strong political will the two countries could potentially be ready to join the Union in 2025 (Communication from the Commission, 2018). Nevertheless, the Commission itself identified this as an extremely ambitious perspective (Communication from the Commission, 2018). Indeed, Montenegro and Serbia have not yet achieved a breakthrough on issues such as the rule of law and the fight against corruption. On the other hand, because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine Serbia's candidacy has become problematic, since the country has chosen to maintain close ties with Russia and does not fully align with the EU's stance.

Additionally, in Bosnia and Herzegovina – which is a potential candidate country – the Russo-Ukrainian war has deteriorated the already fragile political order. It is worth mentioning that secessionist leader Milorad Dodik – who has maintained a close relationship with Russia even amid the invasion of Ukraine (Hajdari, 2023) – was sworn in as Bosnian Serb President in November 2022.

Kosovo is also a potential candidate, but it is still struggling with the fact that some Member States do not recognise its independence. Additionally, Kosovo has been waiting for visa-free travel to the EU since 2010. Crucially, the heightened tensions in July 2022 over license plates and identity cards prompted fears that the violence in the Western Balkans could escalate (Hopkins, 2022).[2]

Thus, several hurdles have led the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans to a dead end. In the meantime, by putting the countries of the region on hold, the EU has aggravated their frustration. Crucially, this deadlock exposes the vulnerable Western Balkans to the influence of rival actors, most notably Russia and China, which seek to penetrate the region posing a threat to both the European values and the European order.

The Shock of the War in Ukraine

While the Union's enlargement policy had been stalled, Russia's invasion of Ukraine came as a shock that changed the course of history. On 21 February 2022, after weeks of extreme tensions, President Vladimir

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[2] Ethnic Serbs living in Kosovo were requested to switch from Serbian license plates to Kosovar ones, and Serbian ID and passports holders to obtain an extra document to enter Kosovo (Hopkins, 2022). Even though Kosovo's government eventually postponed the implementation of these new rules, it is evident that the war in Ukraine fuels extra tensions in this fragile region.

Putin recognised the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. He also ordered Russia's military to deploy troops in these areas under the guise of a peacekeeping mission.

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Four days later, President Zelensky officially applied for EU membership (Council of the European Union, 2022a). Ukraine's application was quickly followed by Georgia's and Moldova's bids.

Russia's brutal attack has accelerated history (Borrell, 2022). It was a *zeitenwende*[3] which violently awakened the EU, triggering a spectacular reaction.[4] The shock was so powerful that it made the Member States instantly break taboos and change long-standing political convictions.[5]

In these unprecedented times, the European Council responded with unusual speed; in June 2022 it granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and declared that Georgia will become a candidate country, after meeting certain criteria. The EU leaders managed to overcome the skepticism towards further enlargement – that still prevails in some Member States – and showed a unity that many did not expect. In this context, Russia's invasion of Ukraine can be viewed as the much-needed impetus to revive political will in the EU for enlargement and to recalibrate the enlargement process.

Granting Ukraine (and Moldova) the status of candidate country was characterised by the European Council President Charles Michel as "a decisive moment for the EU" and as a "geopolitical choice" (European Council, 2022a). Indeed, offering Ukraine the prospect of EU membership sends a powerful political signal. It is an important token of support for a country which is literally defending the EU values (Van Elsuwege, Van der Loo, 2022, p. 9). Of course, in order to produce results, this offer should not remain an empty gesture.

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[3] The term *zeitenwende* was used by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz [Press and Information Office of the Federal Government (2022)]; it translates to a turnaround of time, a turning point in history.

[4] Apart from the enlargement-related reaction, the EU's response also includes unprecedented sanctions, military funding, refugee protection and changes to energy policy. Many of the decisions adopted within a period of few months were simply unthinkable a year ago (Dempsey, 2022a), considering the Member States' diverging interests *vis-à-vis* Russia, their significant differences over security, defense, and migration issues, as well as their general reluctance to expand the EU or even grant candidate status to applicant countries (Bosse, 2022, p. 532).

[5] However, Maurer et al. (2023) argue that "the EU's response has been less a turning point and more of an epiphany, providing a reality check for the EU and its Member States about how far European foreign policy cooperation has evolved in recent years".

To Expand or Not to Expand?

A variety of arguments against enlargement (with regard to both Ukraine and the Western Balkans) have been voiced in the relevant debate. In order to reach a conclusion as to whether the EU should expand or not, this section will present the main arguments of those skeptical of enlargement; it will then confront them by presenting the counterarguments. The following discussion will demonstrate that, while there are some valid concerns, these are outweighed by the risks of keeping Ukraine and the Western Balkans out of the Union. Emphasis will be placed on the geopolitical necessity of enlargement.

The Impact of Further Enlargement on the Functioning of the EU's Institutional System

Several scholars and political leaders support the argument that the EU needs to reform itself before proceeding to further enlargement. This argument is at the core of the so-called "widening vs. deepening" debate. The reasoning here is that further enlargement of the Union would lead to overstretching both because of the increased number of Member States but also because of their heterogeneity; thus, the EU must first reform itself to be fit for its expansion.

This "deepening before widening" approach prevails in France. President Emmanuel Macron, declared that he is "not in favour of moving toward enlargement before having all the necessary certainty and before having made a real reform to allow a deepening and better functioning of the EU" (Gray, 2018).

Indeed, the accession of new countries affects the functioning of the institutional system, since the new Member States must be represented in the EU institutions. Thus, accession of new countries increases the number of members of each institution, with the risk of exceeding the appropriate size allowing for effective intra-institutional deliberation (De Witte, 2002, p. 235). Apart from that, the increase in the number of Member States and the inevitably greater diversity of their views can paralyse the EU's decision-making process, especially on matters where the Council operates under the unanimity rule.

The above are valid concerns. Nevertheless, while acknowledging the value in re-thinking the enlargement process as well as the urgent need for a broader EU reform,[6] France's position can be disputed (Dionysiou, 2022). First of all, the "deepening before widening" approach is based on

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[6] An analysis of the necessary institutional reforms exceeds the scope of this paper.

the view that widening necessarily impedes deepening, depicting the future of the EU, in terms of a dilemma between two alternatives: deepening and widening (De Witte, 2002, p. 239, as cited in Dionysiou, 2022, p. 47).

Interestingly, however, many experts argue that widening does not necessarily impede deepening; in fact, it can even encourage it. For example, Heidbreder (2014) argues that widening is a cause of deepening, as it produces systematic pressure for the deepening of supranational policy-making capacities. Kelemen et al. (2014) distinguish between the short-term and the long-term effects of enlargement, claiming that while widening may lead to short-term gridlock, it may also provide the impetus for institutional changes that facilitate deepening over the long term (Dionysiou, 2022, p. 47). Cvijić and Ćerimagić (2020) state that widening and deepening have always been developed in parallel (p. 13).

The above arguments are further supported by the history of past enlargement waves which provides examples where widening and deepening proceeded in parallel (Dionysiou, 2022, p. 47). For instance, the first enlargement that brought into the Community Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK), was accompanied by the progressive development of important common policies (e.g., reform of the CAP, political cooperation, etc.) and followed by the introduction of the European Monetary System and direct elections to the European Parliament (Marciacq, 2019, p. 6, Dionysiou, 2022, p. 47). Likewise, the enlargement to Austria, Sweden and Finland followed the adoption of the Treaty of Maastricht which involved considerable deepening (e.g., the commitment to Economic and Monetary Union, the establishment of a CFSP, and yet further powers for the European Parliament) (Cameron, 1996, p. 7, Dionysiou, 2022, p. 47). As the High Representative of the Union, Josep Borrell points out, "we have been most successful when we have pursued widening and deepening together" (Borrell, 2022).

Apart from the above theoretical analysis, in order to assess the actual impact of enlargement to prospects of deeper integration, one must consider that even if the green light to open accession talks is given to a country this does not mean that it will join the EU immediately (Dionysiou, 2022, pp. 47–48). For instance, the Union opened accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Yet, the process will probably be very lengthy, given that both countries' political institutions still need fundamental reforms in order to comply with the accession criteria. Thus, in the meantime, there will be plenty of time to negotiate the necessary deepening of the EU (Eisl, 2019, p. 4; Dionysiou, 2022, p. 48).

Therefore, instead of discussing about enlargement as being an obstacle to deeper integration, it would be more prudent to approach it

as an opportunity for reform. Especially in the current circumstances created by the war in Ukraine, the geopolitical imperative for the EU is to both widen and deepen (Borrell, 2022). Thus, although internal reform of the Union is urgently needed, this should not be used as an excuse to postpone enlargement.

The Impact of Further Enlargement on the EU's Democratic Values

Another frequently used argument of those who are skeptical of further enlargement suggests that illiberal tendencies in some candidate countries could undermine the European democratic values. This argument is disputable.

Let's use the example of the Western Balkans. If left outside the EU, these countries – influenced by illiberal ideas and the EU's rivals – will make Europe a less democratic place. Conversely, by reinvigorating democratic reform, and by supporting the idea that the Western Balkans belong to the EU, the Union will leave no room to its opponents that seek to increase their influence in this vulnerable region.

We should also not forget that the Western Balkans have been waiting for progress on their path to EU membership for too long. Meanwhile, the political standstill has favoured populist actors in many countries of the region, who are only waiting for the European promise to go up in smoke (Ellereit, Klapper, 2022, p. 3).

These authoritarian, populist and nationalist tendencies threaten to grow as alternatives to European integration (Ellereit, Klapper, 2022, p. 8). Thus, it is imperative for the EU to demonstrate genuine commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Otherwise, if it continues to give the impression that it lacks the political will and/or is incapable of united action this will soon become a problem for the candidate countries and for the Union itself (Ellereit, Klapper, 2022).

Therefore, as long as these countries are willing and able to meet the conditions for accession, enlargement is in the interest of both the candidates and the EU; it offers a way of structuring the continent around EU values and standards (Borrell, 2022).

It must be underlined, however, that this approach will prove to be useless without safeguarding democracy and the rule of law within the Union.[7] Otherwise, the EU will lose credibility and thus its influence

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[7] For example, the assault of the rule of law and associated constitutional principles in Poland and Hungary in recent years has undermined both the EU's cohesion as a Union of like-mined countries and its legal system which in many respects depends on a shared commitment to common values (Ovádek, 2018).

(Ellereit, Klapper, 2022, p. 5), not to say that the risk of casting the whole European project into doubt will emerge.

The Cost of Further Enlargement

Enlargement-skeptics are also worried about what further expansion of the EU will cost and who will foot the bill. Some are concerned about paying the bill at a time when the EU's multiannual financial budget is already significantly inflated due to measures taken to deal with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, if the EU wishes to meet the current geopolitical moment and speak the language of power, then it should be willing to pay the price not just for the stabilisation of Ukraine but also for the integration of the grey zone in Southeastern Europe.

One should not forget that confronted with natural and man-made disasters (namely, the pandemic and war) the Member States have managed to relax fiscal discipline and support innovative solutions. If the EU leaders want the Union to be taken seriously as a major player in the geopolitical chessboard, they will have to do whatever it takes to stabilise the old continent.

That said, concerns about the cost of enlargement can be addressed – to some extent – with the staged accession model proposed in the third section of this paper, which incorporates the principle of reversibility (whereby candidate countries lose benefits such as access to funding if they backslide on the rule of law and democratic governance).

Enlargement as a Geopolitical Necessity

Having confronted the main arguments of enlargement-skeptics, we can now proceed to the discussion of a crucial pro-enlargement argument: the geopolitical imperative for further enlargement of the EU due to the war in Ukraine.

Russia has always regarded the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries as its natural sphere of influence. It has been typical for Russia to exert pressure through policies on issues like energy, migration, or trade; to cooperate with secessionists; to spread disinformation. In Georgia, for example, anti-EU and anti-West propaganda promoted by Russia is proved to be very persistent.[8]

Thus, Russia's blatant act of aggression deteriorated an already difficult situation. Crucially, it revealed the desperate urgency for a direct and

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[8] Russia's disinformation campaigns in Georgia are discussed in Sirbiladze, Darchiashvili (2019).

clear-cut EU response. The Russian war can have two distinct results: it can either shatter the European order – "that of a Europe whole and free and at peace" (Spohr, 2022, p. 10) – or it can become a catalyst for the belated birth of a geopolitical Union which will uphold peace and security on the old continent. It all depends on how the EU will choose to react.

To that end, the tool of enlargement must be used wisely. Amidst the crisis management, the EU needs to speedily develop new ways to engage with its nearest neighbours. This cannot be done by offering alternatives to the possibility of full membership; instead, a credible membership perspective seems to be the best way to move forward.

To be more precise, promoting enlargement towards Ukraine can now be seen as a geopolitical necessity for two main reasons. First, it can end the strategic ambiguity that left Ukraine exposed to Russia's imperial mindset. Second, making a clear choice is essential in order to build the EU's credibility as an emerging geopolitical actor which can secure the European order and defend the European values.

But, apart from Ukraine, Russia's aggression is also a stark reminder that the EU needs to develop a stronger geopolitical approach in the Western Balkans which are also exposed to efforts by strategic rivals of the EU to penetrate the region and strengthen their foothold (once again threatening the European order and undermining the European values).[9]

Therefore, the war must not distract the EU from the Western Balkan countries. In fact, because of the war, the focus should also be on the Western Balkans (at least those countries that condemn Russian aggression).[10] This means that the Union needs to take decisive action to re-launch the stalled enlargement process towards the Western Balkans. This is imperative not just for the sake of the countries of the region, but also for the Union itself. Faced with an ongoing war of conquest in Ukraine and hence an assault against the European order, it is in the EU's interest to anchor all like-minded countries by having them adhere to its vision of a rules-based system. Continuing with business as usual would be a geopolitical mistake.

In light of the above and keeping in mind that the stakes are too high, the EU leaders need to seize the watershed moment and think big. This means that they should stay focused on promoting enlargement, with a fresh

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[9] This paper focuses on Russian threat. However, China is also trying to increase its influence in the Western Balkans and its rise as a geoeconomic influencer should not be underestimated.

[10] This raises the issue of whether Serbia would be eligible due to its pro-Russian policy. In this case, the country's accession could be put on hold in a similar way to Turkey's accession.

and genuine commitment to the European future of both Ukraine and the Western Balkans. The EU's ability to defend its values in its neighbourhood and to uphold peace and security in Europe will define its credibility as a geopolitical actor for years to come (Blockmans, Raik, 2022, p. 3).

Re-evaluating the Enlargement Process

Even before the outbreak of the war, there had been considerable debate over the need to reboot the stalled enlargement process towards the Western Balkans. A step was taken in this direction, when the European Commission – which has branded itself a "geopolitical Commission" – published its Communication on "Enhancing the Accession Process – A Credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans" (the so-called new enlargement methodology) (Communication from the Commission, 2020).[11]

The key innovation of this revised methodology is that it groups the chapters of the enlargement process into thematic clusters: fundamentals; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources, agriculture and cohesion; and external relations. If applied efficiently, the clustering of negotiation chapters can provide a potential for accelerated negotiations (Dionysiou, 2022, p. 50).

However, even though the new enlargement methodology is widely considered as a positive development, Russia's attack on Ukraine sparked a debate on whether the EU needs a new enlargement policy (Dempsey, 2022b). Nevertheless, while acknowledging the value in re-thinking and in re-evaluating the enlargement methodology, this does not mean that the Union needs a wholly new enlargement process; instead, it needs to adjust the existing one to the new geopolitical environment.

To that end, this paper proposes three ways of adjusting the enlargement process to the new challenges: a) more extensive use of qualified majority voting (QMV); b) a geopolitical turn of the EU's thinking on enlargement; and c) strong focus on fundamentals combined with a staged accession model that incorporates the principle of reversibility.

More Extersnive Use of Qualified Majority Voting

Before we start discussing ways of making the enlargement process faster, fairer and more effective, we must address the elephant in the

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[11] The new enlargement methodology was largely inspired by a French non-paper titled "Reforming the European Union accession process" which was circulated among the Member States (Non-paper, 2019).

room: the role that individual Member States have repeatedly played in hampering accession negotiations. Under current rules, EU Member States must unanimously agree to allow candidate countries to progress at each stage of accession. In this context, one Member State can block the accession of another even if the candidate country is fully qualified (Cvijić, 2019). Indeed, as discussed in a previous section, in many occasions, Member States held the accession process hostage for reasons that were more related to their national agendas rather than the process itself. As a result, numerous times, the EU has paid a price for the unanimity rule, by weakening and delaying its actions (Borell, 2022).

Taking the above into consideration, many (Borrell, 2022; Cvijić, Nechev, 2022; Cvijić et al. 2019; Cvijić, 2019) argue that the proper solution is a more extensive use of QMV; simply because, without QMV, enlargement could be endlessly hijacked by a single Member State. As Borrell (2022) explains, if countries know in advance that the final decision can be taken by a QMV they have a strong incentive to negotiate, to create alliances and to shape the consensus. Conversely, if they know that they can block everything they do not have an incentive to search for common ground (Borrell, 2022).

Of course, quitting unanimity is not a panacea; this is why it is part of an ongoing debate. But after Russia's attack on Ukraine, the context is new: the war has highlighted the need for the EU to take decisions of high geopolitical importance in real time; waiting and observing is not an option anymore. As the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, explains "To be a global leader, the EU needs to be able to act fast".[12]

Nevertheless, abolishing veto throughout the whole accession process does not seem to be a realistic scenario. Given that some Member States would be unwilling to entirely give up the right to veto, some experts (Cvijić, Nechev, 2022; Cvijić, Cerimagic, 2020; Cvijić, 2019; Dimitrov, 2022) propose to remove veto power (at least) from the intermediary stages of enlargement process.

Indeed, introducing QMV for all the intermediary stages – to validate the progress of a candidate country – would make the process faster, fairer and more effective. Individual Member States would retain the right to make a final decision on future membership and national parliaments would still have the right not to ratify the accession treaty (Cvijić, Cerimagic, 2020, p. 10). Therefore, QMV would not deprive

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[12] President von der Leyen has urged Member States to switch to QMV in areas such as sanctions and human rights.

a Member State of the right to block the accession of a candidate country. However, in this context, the political cost to a Member State of turning a candidate down at the end of the process when that country has fulfilled all membership criteria would be significantly higher, compelling the Member State to act more responsibly (Cvijić, 2019).

Thus, a switch to a more extensive use of QMV – as discussed above – can guarantee not only faster but also more effective and fairer decision-making; and this type of decision-making is a crucial element in the process of shaping EU's identity as a strong geopolitical actor.

A Geopolitical Turn on the EU's Thinking on Enlargement

Russia's invasion of Ukraine forces the EU to start approaching enlargement from a different point of view: that of geopolitics. As discussed previously, because of the war, enlargement has obtained a greater geopolitical value than ever before. It is not only about technocratic issues; it is also a matter of ensuring that Ukraine and the Western Balkans are anchored into the EU's orbit, away from the Russian (and Chinese) influence. Therefore, the EU needs to stop approaching enlargement as a purely technocratic process.

It must be underlined, however, that the new enlargement methodology has already adopted a more political approach to enlargement. For instance, it explicitly acknowledges the non-technical character of accession negotiations, stating that "it is time to put the political nature of the process front and centre and ensure stronger steering and high-level engagement from the Member States" (Communication from the Commission, 2020, p. 3).

Of course, this geopolitical turn should not lead to any compromise on the complete fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria. Instead, it is imperative for the EU to promote enlargement without lowering its standards on democracy, the rule of law, and regulatory compliance.

Strong Focus on Fundamentals Combined with a Staged Accession Model Which Incorporates Reversibility

In order to boost progress in governance and prevent backsliding, the enlargement process should combine three elements: a) strong focus on fundamentals (rule of law, democratic standards, and economic reforms); b) gradual integration (Council of the European Union, 2022b) and c) principle of reversibility (Council of the European Union, 2022b).

Regarding the need for a stronger focus on fundamentals it must be noted that the new enlargement methodology already highlights that "credibility should be reinforced through an even stronger focus on the fundamental reforms" (Communication from the Commission, 2020, p. 2). Therefore, the way forward is already described; it just needs to be followed. To be more precise, according to the revised methodology, the negotiations on the fundamentals will have a central role, opening first and closing last (Communication from the Commission, 2020, pp. 2–3); thus, progress on these will determine the overall pace of negotiations.

Concerning the concept of managed and proportionate integration, it is proposed by the European Council President Charles Michel (Council of the European Union, 2022b). The purpose of such a model is to bring tangible benefits (e.g., benefits from European programs and funding) to candidate countries during accession negotiations, instead of withholding rewards until they join the Union: i.e., more for more (Council of the European Union, 2022b).

President Michel also calls for the principle of reversibility to be integrated into the model, whereby candidate countries lose benefits if they backslide on the rule of law and democratic governance (Council of the European Union, 2022b): i.e., less for less. In that manner, the enlargement process would encourage the necessary reforms in the candidate countries.

Once again, however, these ideas are already incorporated into the new enlargement methodology. Thus, as mentioned before, the way forward is already described; it just needs to be followed.

The Complementary Tool of a European (Geo)Political Community

Apart from the previously discussed debate on how to re-energise the enlargement process, additional ideas have been expressed about building a wider European (Geo)political Community as a structure that would help the Union and its neighbours coordinate closely on issues of common interest (including geopolitics, defense, free movement of people, energy, etc.). These ideas are mainly attributed to the European Council President Charles Michel and French President Emmanuel Macron who have envisioned different variations of such a Community.

According to Borell (2022), this broader Community could unite all like-minded European countries that share democratic principles and want to pursue concrete and flexible forms of cooperation. The Community could also involve certain countries that are not necessarily

destined to join the Union, such as Norway, Switzerland or the UK, if they wish (Borell, 2022).[13]

Nevertheless, some experts have raised concerns about the creation of such a Community. For instance, Stefan Lehne believes that the countries wishing to join the EU will fear it would relegate them to an outer circle, whereas countries such as the UK that prefer a more distant relationship will find it too constraining (Dempsey, 2022b). Similarly, Bechev (2022) argues that in a Europe of concentric circles, the Western Balkan countries run the risk of being forever stuck in the waiting room.

Some others claim that the creation of a European (Geo)political Community can offer some benefits if treated properly. Paul Taylor, for instance, argues that it is an idea worth exploring (Dempsey, 2022b).

In any case, it must be underlined that the contested geopolitical environment created by Russia's attack on Ukraine, forces the EU to find and use additional instruments to uphold security in its neighbourhood. Thus, in this new context, the idea of a European (Geo)political Community has obtained a significant geopolitical dimension. As Borrell (2022) explains, it has to do with the future organisation of the European continent and how the EU should position itself, following Russia's assault on Ukraine. Such a Community could also send a clear signal of togetherness in times of escalating geopolitical conflicts (Brändle, 2022). Most importantly, a European alliance of like-minded democracies, with the EU at its helm, would support the goal of building a stronger geopolitical EU (Mucznik, 2022).

Of course, this issue is complex and requires careful consideration, but the general idea has merits (Borrell, 2022). In any case, it must be underlined that this wider Community should be complementary to the enlargement process, and not an alternative to it. This is clearly stated by the European Council which clarifies that "such a framework will not replace existing EU policies and instruments, notably enlargement" (European Council, 2022b).

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[13] A similar idea was introduced at the end of the Cold War by French President François Mitterrand, who proposed a European Confederation to associate the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe with the EU, which would remain essentially a club for Western Europe. For a brief presentation of the European Confederation as envisioned by François Mitterrand, see Troitiño et al., 2017, pp. 136–137.

Conclusions

Russia's attack on Ukraine has ignited a catalyst for change across the whole of Europe, altering the perception of the role of the EU in a hostile international environment. Among the many aspects of its impact, the war dramatically emphasised what in recent years has received too little attention: the need for the transformation of the EU into a real geopolitical actor.

This paper argued that a credible enlargement process constitutes a valuable tool for this urgently needed transformation of the Union. Thus, enlargement should be treated with the requisite priority. This means that the EU leaders should stay focused on promoting enlargement, with a genuine commitment to the European future of both Ukraine and the Western Balkans.

In light of the above considerations, the paper underlined the need for re-thinking the enlargement process in order to be fit for the new challenges created by the war. To that end, three ways of adjusting the existing enlargement process were proposed: a) more extensive use of QMV; b) a geopolitical turn of the EU's thinking on enlargement; and c) strong focus on fundamentals combined with a staged accession model that incorporates the principle of reversibility. The concept of a wider European (Geo)political Community can also play a supportive role. However, it must be perceived as a complementary tool to the enlargement process, and not as an alternative to it.

In any case, the current momentum for a geopolitical EU that welcomes its neighbours with open arms should not be missed. The ongoing tragedy of the war should spur the EU and its Member States to work together in an effort to build a real geopolitical EU; a Union that will be able to provide security and promote the European values all over the continent. Regardless of when it realises this vision, it is imperative for the EU to stay focused on its objective of self-transformation.

The previous analysis focused solely on the enlargement process towards the Western Balkans and Ukraine. A future research that would expand the scope of discussion to Moldova and Georgia would help establishing a clearer picture of the prospect of building a geopolitical EU as an actor of stability in the old continent.

The paper also acknowledged the need for EU reforms. However, the discussion of these reforms falls outside the scope of this paper. Thus, further research could focus on the reforms which are urgently needed in light of the war in Ukraine. This can also be perceived as an aspect of another crucial debate that has already started about whether the necessary

reforms can be achieved via amending the Lisbon Treaty or via exploring its unused potential (e.g. *passarelle* clauses).

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