

INTRODUCTORY NOTE¹

ENLARGEMENT AND THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Throughout the history of European integration, enlargement has played a fundamental role in achieving the founding goals of the European Union (EU) – promoting peace, stability and prosperity – through deeper political and economic integration. However, while the inclusion of new Member States has been seen as a privileged platform for consolidating democracy and implementing structural reforms within the EU, it has also raised complex issues. These include the accession criteria,³ the capacity to integrate new members and the response to new European policy needs,⁴ which call into question the internal cohesion of the Union. This difficult balance between widening and integration is exacerbated by the current geopolitical context, marked by the war in Ukraine, growing tension in the Middle East, migration crises and multiple challenges to democracy. The debate on revitalising the European enlargement process, with the opening of negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the recognition of Georgia's candidate status in 2024, as well as its impact on the future of the EU, is therefore not limited to the accession of new candidates. Rather, it requires a comprehensive reflection on the EU's ability to adapt to the intertwined changes taking place at the local, regional and international levels, strengthening its internal and external policies, promoting effective strategic autonomy and reinforcing its partnerships at different levels of international relations.

The fact that this discussion is taking place against the backdrop of a war on the EU's doorstep, the worsening of several regional conflicts with potential systemic impact, the crisis of democracies and the growth of the radical, Eurosceptic and Eurocynical right, not only in EU Member States but also in the European Parliament, requires in-depth and multifaceted reflection on the relationship between enlargement and the future of the Union. Except for the first enlargement in 1973, all the subsequent enlargement processes have been motivated by (geo)political concerns and the pursuit of democratic consolidation in states recently freed from authoritarian regimes and/or newly independent states, as well as their anchoring to the founding principles and values of European integration. To ensure the success of the various enlargements and

the fulfilment of the EU's historic mission, significant changes were made to European institutions and policies, entangled in a dialectic between enlargement and deepening, contingent on the greater number and diversity of Member States. However, these changes have not always been implemented in a manner fully consistent with the need for effective and efficient responses to the new dynamics and challenges of European integration, triggering a process of 'cumulative shortcomings'.⁵

The current enlargement process evidences, however, dynamics with greater complexity. Although there is a logic of continuity with previous enlargements in terms of the underlying (geo)political motivations and the cumulative shortcomings resulting from them, the current motivational logic seems to have substantially altered the prevailing paradigm. Until Croatia's accession in 2013 – the date of the last EU enlargement – the dominant narrative was that of integrating new Member States as a way of promoting peace, stability and prosperity in those territories, and sharing with them the advantages of the European project. However, with the revitalisation of the Enlargement Policy, there has been significant change. The territorial expansion of the EU is no longer presented as a platform to ensure the survival of European partners; rather, it is projected as a necessity to ensure the very survival of the Union itself. In a context of changing internal political balances with latent risks of disintegration, accelerated transformation of the international order, proliferation of scenarios of instability, uncertainty and insecurity at different levels of international relations, and the return of a large-scale offensive on European territory, a feeling of ontological insecurity has arisen among EU institutions, Member States and citizens. This feeling has triggered a vital opportunity to deepen European integration, including through the Enlargement Policy, which is now seen as a necessary strategy to protect the values of the Union and ensure the survival of the European project.⁶ Thus, not only does this new wave of possible enlargements affect the territorial and institutional dimensions of the EU, but it also encompasses its very essence, reviving the teleological ends of integration,⁷ restoring the historical dialectic between external threat and internal unity,⁸ and therefore bearing undeniable consequences for its future.

The articles included in this thematic dossier aim to contribute to a holistic and critical understanding of the opportunities and challenges that enlargement entails, in different disciplinary dimensions, theoretical perspectives, political approaches and case studies. In the opening article of this dossier, David Phinnemore and Erhan İçener reflect on how, in recent years, the discourse on enlargement fatigue – which became dominant after the Eastern enlargement from 2004 to 2007 – has been gradually replaced by an emphasis on its importance as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This shift in narratives and perceptions is at the root of the revitalisation of the Enlargement Policy, after the longest period without any Member State joining the EU since its first enlargement in 1973. Nevertheless, the authors highlight enlargement as a dynamic and complex process, dependent on multiple factors that condition the effective accession

of candidate countries. Based on this understanding, David Phinnemore and Erhan İçener consider five variables – EU commitment, Member State preferences, supranational activism, integration capacity and public opinion – to discern whether at least some of the current nine candidates will join the EU in the foreseeable future. The analysis reveals that, despite the existence of a strong narrative framing the fundamental value of enlargement, it is unclear whether this will result in the ability to ensure that candidate states comply with the needed reforms to join the EU or whether the latter will implement the institutional and political reforms required for their effective accession. The authors therefore conclude that a new ‘big bang’ enlargement is unlikely, with the gradual accession of these countries to the EU being a more realistic scenario. This shift in the political narrative on enlargement, following the invasion of Ukraine, clearly highlights the redefinition of the EU’s foreign policy and its affirmation as a geopolitical actor, as highlighted in Maria Raquel Freire’s article. This turning point for the Union, from a normative position to a more geopolitical approach, reflects a conception of enlargement focused on the perspective of border dynamics. The author reflects on how its ongoing construction, deconstruction and reconstruction contributes to collective imaginaries of security and insecurity in a new geopolitical framework. This analysis emphasises how understandings of borders and conflict dynamics have the potential to accelerate the processes of geopolitisation of instruments and agendas at the European level. By highlighting how the enlargement triggered by the war in Ukraine adds a component of security and of construction of different borders, the article underscores the logic allowing the EU to present itself as a space of resistance in the face of two other significant factors: Russia as the ‘violent-other’, aggressor and violator of international law, and the temporal-other, constituted by the memory of a pre-integration Europe marked by devastating interstate wars. However, this need for geopolitical affirmation of the EU continues to coexist with national tensions and intergovernmental logics that hinder the adoption of common positions and actions within the European framework.

If the Russian Federation was a revitalising actor in the Enlargement Policy and in the redefinition of the EU’s political priorities due to the feeling of ontological insecurity it generated, it may also play a disruptive role in the pursuit of this policy. Lucas Pitaval demonstrates and analyses Moscow’s interference and hybrid warfare in the 2024 elections in Georgia and Moldova, focusing in particular on the implications of these developments for their accession to the EU. The author sees Russian interference in the formation of political discourse and election results as part of a complex set of hybrid warfare tactics – combining manipulation through social media, various forms of electoral fraud and military presence in some separatist regions – used by Moscow to maintain control over the post-Soviet space and to counter the pro-European ambitions of the states in this territory. Based on this reflection, the author questions the ability of these countries to implement the reforms required to join the EU, concluding

that Russian interference had contrasting results in the two cases under analysis, with Moldova managing to maintain its pro-EU orientation, while Georgia experienced a period of political turmoil that resulted in the freezing of its European integration. He adds that this example of vulnerability to Russian interference should urge the EU to strengthen mechanisms for preventing, countering and addressing hybrid threats in its neighbourhood, and to accelerate accession for those who remain committed to democratic values.

Yasmin Renne and Ana Paula Tostes share the understanding that the factors of instability and oscillation between pro-EU and pro-Russia orientations should press forward the process of European enlargement. To substantiate this position, the authors focus on the expansion of the Eastern Partnership to Moldova and Ukraine. The article highlights this process as a new strategy for the Europeanisation of the eastern border, following Brussels' closer rapprochement with the region, which began in the 2000s and was established by the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004. However, while the objective at this stage was to promote rapprochement without integration, the war in Ukraine has ushered in a new phase in the relationship, which clearly includes the prospect of accession. By framing the issue within theoretical debates on Europeanisation and differentiated integration, the authors argue that the critical geopolitical moment brought about by the invasion of Ukraine has launched a new approach to the importance of accession as a strategy for rapprochement and exercise of influence by the EU in the wider European space, as a response to Russian manoeuvres and as a geopolitical tool for stabilising the eastern neighbourhood.

Along the same lines, Pedro Cunha da Silva's article presents the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as a driving force behind EU enlargement in different geographical areas and political-institutional frameworks. In addition, through a mixed analysis, it demonstrates the impact of this event on the accession processes of candidate countries, potential candidates and applicants for European membership. Based on a comparative analysis of the European Commission's progress reports and specific developments in the ten countries identified, it presents the prospects and main challenges faced by each candidate, considering the impact of the war in Ukraine on the progress of their accession processes. This comprehensive reading allows us to identify and question the revitalisation of the Enlargement Policy beyond the new candidate countries in the post-Soviet space.

In fact, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Western Balkans also saw significant progress in their EU accession process. In this context, Pascoal Santos Pereira's article analyses the specific case of North Macedonia to explain the factors accounting for the lengthy accession processes of the Western Balkan countries, which, according to the author, have led to simultaneous enlargement and accession fatigue. The analysis highlights how the slowness of these processes stems from enlargement fatigue in the EU – particularly due to the 2004–7 Eastward enlargement –, the lack of political will on the part of Member States and successive internal crises.

This, in turn, has contributed to these candidate countries' fatigue, due to growing informal, political and identity-related conditionalities, reflected in the lack of a real and tangible prospect of formal integration into the EU that would politically justify and guarantee public support for the demanding reforms associated with the accession process. Based on a historical analysis, the article also seeks to understand these processes and mutual perceptions, in comparison with the Eastern Enlargement.

In this context of protractedness and difficulties hindering the accession processes, Türkiye emerges as the longest-standing candidate for European membership. André Pereira Matos makes a significant contribution to this reflection by exploring how normative dynamics in EU-Türkiye relations develop in contexts of asymmetric cooperation. Using the theoretical framework of tactical constructivism, methodologically supported by a comparative study of the relationship in the fields of migration and energy, the author shows how norms have been strategically instrumentalised by both actors, neglecting a genuine commitment to their normative substance. This study lays bare the tensions between normativity and pragmatism, strengthening and expanding the academic debate on the EU's external coherence in the context of its Enlargement Policy, in an international context that tends to reinforce Türkiye's geopolitical importance.

The last two articles in this thematic dossier offer a cross-sectional reading of the various cases at hand, seeking to go beyond them. By returning to the discussion of the fundamental goals of enlargement, anchored in the founding principles and values of European integration, as mentioned at the beginning of this introductory note, they highlight the need to balance the difficult duality between the territorial expansion of the EU and the cohesion and political deepening of European integration. In this sense, Mirko Rosa's article reflects on the contribution of the Enlargement Policy to the evolution of the role of the rule of law as a fundamental value of the EU. In his analysis of the internal and external legal and political mechanisms designed to ensure adherence to the rule of law, the author highlights the importance of its role in the current enlargement process and its evolution in the wake of lessons learned in previous contexts, with particular emphasis on the cases of Hungary and Poland. The analysis stresses the EU's legal and political weaknesses in safeguarding the rule of law, the reasons for the limited results in this area, among the candidate countries, and the reforms needed to ensure stronger EU political leadership and more effective action in this field. Closing this dossier, Youri Devuyst's article analyses the risk of overstretch associated with the Union's enlargement, based on Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*. The author highlights the existing knowledge about the fact that expansions, accomplished out of necessity and without proper planning, jeopardise the survival of political projects, either through challenges to its organisational and political decision-making capacity, or due to the additional efforts required in terms of security and defence. Applying a Machiavellian analysis to the current enlargement of the EU, the author demonstrates how it should be accompanied by an effort to reform and

strengthen integration before the accession of a significant number of new members can be considered, so as not to jeopardise the survival of the Union. He also argues that this effort should take on a (pre-)federal configuration allowing it to overcome the shortcomings already evinced by intergovernmental and confederative models in facilitating the decision-making process and resolving the fundamental problems of European integration, without neglecting its fundamental values and its non-hegemonic and democratic nature.

The articles in this thematic dossier are thus structured around a meta-analysis of Enlargement Policy, demonstrating the dynamic and historically complex nature of accession processes, which is currently corroborated by the little likelihood of a new significant enlargement (David Phinnemore and Erhan İçener) and the EU's geopolitical positioning (Maria Raquel Freire). Most of the case studies presented here emphasise the role of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in revitalising the Enlargement Policy, while warning of Moscow's potentially undermining stance regarding ongoing accession processes (Lucas Pitaval, Yasmin Renne and Ana Paula Tostes, Pedro Cunha da Silva). Other case studies, such as those of Türkiye and North Macedonia (André Pereira Matos, Pascoal Santos Pereira), refer to the political instrumentalisation of the norms associated with enlargement and the conflict of national interests involved. Against this backdrop, the two closing articles emphasise the need to anchor enlargement in a reevaluation of the EU's founding principles, expressed in the deepening of its norms and political system (Mirko Rosa, Yuri Devuyt). This is a particularly relevant reflection in a local, regional and global context of increasing fragmentation and contestation of the international order and the norms that govern it, of the multiplication and overlapping of polycrises, as well as of political and social polarisation, to which the EU is no stranger. This thematic dossier therefore aims to contribute to the crucial discussion and research of the implications of the current enlargement for European integration and the management of security dynamics in the broader regional context, but also for the future of the EU as a political project based on cooperation as the preferred means of ensuring peace, stability and prosperity within and beyond its borders. **RI**

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ENDNOTES

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³ See, for instance, DUDLEY, Danijeta – ‘European Union membership conditionality: the Copenhagen criteria and the quality of democracy’. In *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. Vol. 20, No. 4, 2020, pp. 525–45; BÖHMELT, Tobias; FREYBURG, Tina – ‘Forecasting candidate states’ compliance with EU accession rules, 2017–2050’. In *Journal of European Public Policy*. Vol. 25, No. 11, 2018, pp. 1667–85; and KOLLIAS, Christos; MESSIS, Petros – ‘Are candidate countries converging with the EU in terms of the Copenhagen political criteria?’. In

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⁴ On these matters, see: BÖRZEL, Tanja A.; DIMITROVA, Antoaneta; SCHIMMELFENNIG, Frank – ‘European Union enlargement and integration capacity: concepts, findings and policy implications’. In *Journal of European Public Policy*. Vol. 24, No. 2, 2017, pp. 157–76; and SCHIMMELFENNIG, Frank – ‘EU enlargement and differentiated integration: discrimination or equal treatment?’. In *Journal of European Public Policy*. Vol. 21, No. 5, 2014, pp. 681–98.

⁵ ERIK, Jones; KELEMEN, R. Daniel; MEUNIER, Sophie – ‘Failing forward? The Euro crisis and the incomplete nature of European integration’. In *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol. 49, No. 7, 2016, pp. 1010–34; ERIK, Jones; KELEMEN, R. Daniel; MEUNIER, Sophie – ‘Failing forward? Crises and patterns of European integration’. In *Journal of European Public Policy*. Vol. 28, No. 10, 2021, pp. 1519–36.

⁶ DIAS, Vanda Amaro – ‘A construção da segurança ontológica da União Europeia numa ordem internacional em mudança: que desafios e oportunidades?’. In *A Construção Europeia – 40 Anos de Reflexão em Coimbra*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2025, pp. 339–51.

⁷ SANGIOVANNI, Andrea – ‘Debating the EU’s *raison d’être*: on the relation on legitimacy and justice?’. In *Journal of Common Market Studies*. Vol. 57, No. 1, 2019, pp. 13–27.

⁸ SEBASTIÃO, Dina – ‘As “crises” da UE e os desafios teleológicos da integração: reflexões e contributos para a investigação e a política europeia’. In *A Construção Europeia...*, pp. 97–113.

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