

## NEAR or FEAR: The Security Aspects of EU Enlargement

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### Executive Summary

- > The EU's enlargement towards the Western Balkans and Turkey would represent an enlargement towards a geographical zone neighbouring instability and insecurity. At the same time, the integration of these countries in the EU would represent the main solution to the security problems that emanate from this region.
- > Yet, at present, a major obstacle for the EU's enlargement policy stems from within the Union.
- > This obstacle can be overcome: 'enlargement' can once again bring dynamism into the European integration process, if it is designed to become a solution to the problem of security through solidarity against terror and coordination on migration management.
- > To this effect, decision-makers in EU institutions and member states need to face the fear that the prospect of another enlargement often represents. Debates about enlargement should be upheld not only by EU policy-makers, but also by academia and civil society organisations. Enlargement concerns Europe's common future, which needs to be built together.

The 2015 refugee crisis added to the strain for the European integration project that is today beleaguered by Brexit and a decision on the future path of the EU. When the crisis hit, all member state governments had to take their domestic constituencies into consideration first. By consequence, the relations between older members and new members deteriorated, with increasing Central and Eastern European (CEE) resentments about the Commission's proposals for relocation schemes for refugees and the favouring of a multi-speed Europe by older member states. Border

controls were reinstated in several Schengen states, calling into question decades of solid integration in this area. Many CEE governments had also heavily carried the burden of the Ukraine crisis and had rather high ratios with respect to asylum applications per population. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that even before the arrival of a huge influx of Syrian refugees, EU states were already facing increasing migration from Western Balkan countries, where youth unemployment reaches up to 35-45 percent in Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina. This also added to the potential these countries could contribute to the number of European foreign fighters along 'the so-called Islamic State' (ISIS) lines. Another concern was the growing influence of Russia in the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), which added to the perception that this region bears potential for both instability and direct confrontation with a significant external rival for Europe. All these factors do not contribute to a favourable public opinion in Western Europe about further European integration per se, let alone enlargement to the Western Balkans.

This policy brief summarises the discussions held during the panel "NEAR or FEAR: The Security Aspect of EU Enlargement" organised by the College of Europe Development Office and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) on 16 November 2016 in Bruges. This event was requested by the European Commission as a communication action in the area of EU Enlargement, in order to build a more informed public debate about the necessity to conduct a credible enlargement policy (European Commission, 2014). This is all the more important since the Juncker Commission has started its mandate by stating that there will be no further enlargement during the 2014-2020 term.

The accession of the CEE countries to the EU was considered as their 'return to Europe'. The enlargement policy was both a mission to that effect and the most successful foreign policy tool the EU ever possessed. However, its success quickly turned into an 'enlargement

fatigue', and enlargement policy lost its attraction especially when it became merged with the EU's neighbourhood policy within the Commission. This policy brief considers the reasons for the reluctance within the (especially Western) European public about further EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans and Turkey. It argues that such an enlargement would represent an enlargement towards a geographical zone neighbouring instability and insecurity, and discusses how the EU's policy of ambivalence deteriorates the situation on the ground. It shows that the inclusion of these countries in the EU is in reality the solution to the security problems that emanate from this region.

### **The security situation in enlargement countries**

The recovery of the Western Balkans from the dissolution of Yugoslavia has been a difficult process for all countries of the region. Turkey is the longest standing candidate that started its accession process in 1999, alongside half of the 2004/2007 enlargement countries. These countries have their own internal and external problems that significantly impact their economic, social and political conditions. Two major developments, however, have worsened their situation: the Western Balkan migration route and the emergence of ISIS. Each will be analysed below.

#### ***Migration, social instabilities and political problems***

The first problem that these countries encounter is the growing social instability. The emergence of the Balkan migratory route in summer 2015 and its subsequent closure have left thousands of migrants stuck *en route*. As the Director-General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) William Lacy Swing repeatedly underlines: 'Migration is not a problem to be solved; it is a reality to be managed' (UN Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 2015). Even though some financial remedies are provided to field workers, to tackle the many needs of the migrants, more than responding to basic human needs is at stake. Many migrants resort to using migrant smugglers in the absence of an option to travel in a regular manner. A comprehensive review of migrant smuggling networks published by Europol and INTERPOL (2016) estimates that the annual turnover of migrant smuggling was worth an estimated USD 5-6 billion in 2015, representing one of the main profit-generating activities for organised criminals in Europe. The report highlights that facilitators behind migrant smuggling are organized in loosely connected networks, and that migrant smuggling is a multinational business. Suspects originate from over 100 countries.

The elevation of standards on border security by the candidate countries has proved vital for dealing with the migration crisis and fight against networks of human smuggling. First, the EU asked Turkey to act as a

gatekeeper of migration flows to Europe ever since the Accession Partnership of 2001. In 2003, Turkey was requested to sign a readmission agreement. However, it took over a decade for Turkey to agree on the signing of such an agreement. In 2013, the country went through a ground-breaking reform, revamping its migration and asylum system, establishing the Directorate-General of Migration Management with 3000 new expert staff. In December of that year, Turkey signed a readmission agreement with the EU. Visa-free travel arrangements in the Schengen area for Turkish citizens was the only *quid pro quo*. This visa-exemption process is now on hold due to the political tensions over the counter-terrorism laws in Turkey. Without the conclusion of the visa-exemption regime, the Turkish government has no incentives for upholding the readmission agreement, which could also jeopardise the refugee deal of March 2016. In fact, as early as September 2016 the Turkish EU Minister warned that Turkey would not implement a readmission agreement with the EU meant to stem the flow of illegal migrants if it did not obtain the visa-free travel to Europe it had been promised.

Second, the Western Balkan countries are heavily dependent on EU aid for managing the daily needs of the stranded refugees on their territories awaiting decisions on their future. According to Frontex, the so-called Western Balkan route became a popular passageway into the EU in 2012, when Schengen visa restrictions were relaxed for five Balkan countries. In 2013, nearly all of the 20,000 people applied for asylum after crossing the Hungarian border illegally. Migrant flows from Greece followed. Part of the reason for the dramatic rise in the overall numbers in 2014 was irregular migration by nationals of the region, especially from Kosovo, who joined the northward march by Syrians and Somalis. The record number of migrants arriving in Greece had a direct effect on the Western Balkan route, as the people who entered the EU in Greece tried to make their way via FYROM and Serbia into Hungary and Croatia and then towards Western Europe. In all of 2015, the region recorded 764,000 detections of illegal border crossings by migrants, a 16-fold rise from 2014 (Frontex, 2016).

#### ***Foreign fighters and border security***

The second problem linked with border security is the rise of ISIS in the Middle East, and its attraction to many 'foreign fighters' in both Western Europe and the Balkans. The fairly porous and long border between the countries of the enlargement region and Syria has made it possible for foreign fighters to travel along this region to fight in the Syrian war. From 2011 until the end of 2016, close to 40,000 people from 128 different countries have been banned from entering Turkey. An additional 3000 from 95 different countries have been deported. The Western

Balkan countries also need to upgrade their border controls to prevent such travels through the region. This has become an important part of their accession process.

A report from the EU's Institute for Security Studies (Petrovic, 2016) states that Balkan countries are among Europe's top exporters of volunteer fighter for radical Islamic groups, even if Islamic traditions in the Balkans had never had extremist tendencies. Conflicts in Bosnia, Kosovo and FYROM resulted in the arrival of Salafist foreign fighters, which remained after the conflicts were 'resolved'. The poor economic conditions and the lacking employment prospects in these countries also feed into extremism in the region. The report also states that due to their NATO and EU accession aspirations, Balkan countries work to comply with UN resolution 2178 to combat terrorism, including the financing of terrorist activity. They adapted their laws, making it illegal to participate in or organise travel to war zones.

These points illustrate how responding responsibly to refugee flows and control of borders becomes a single, complex and intertwined issue. As the importance of border controls in the EU's vicinity gain precedence, the only way the neighbouring countries will be incentivised to implement EU-compatible controls is by joining the Union. Without the prospect of membership, they risk becoming the 'dumping grounds' for unwanted refugees, having to deal with all security implications on their own.

### **The Lack of European Enthusiasm**

Despite all these problems in and around the candidate countries, the major obstacles for the EU's enlargement policy seems to stem from within the Union. EU institutions do not have political ownership of the process any more, and member states see the topic as one of political controversy for opposing further enlargement, thus in effect helping Euro-sceptic and xenophobic rhetoric to gain ground. When combined, the results of these two trends do not allow much space for a future enlargement policy.

### ***The increasing power of national prerogatives***

The 2004-2007 accessions resulted in a general enlargement fatigue, among both EU leaders and national politicians. Today, when enlargement manages to make it to the agenda of any political debate, the national prerogatives of each member state for further enlargement hinder the emergence of an EU-wide assessment of enlargement policies. Most of the current candidates are involved in a political dispute with at least one member state, who threatens to veto further advancement of that candidate further down the path of negotiations. Even member states that do not have a dispute with a particular candidate country promised their publics referenda prior to further EU enlargement. In

doing so, they claim to establish 'national safeguards and mechanisms' to control the process of further enlargement (Balfour & Stratulat, 2015). This results in the 'nationalisation' of the enlargement process (Hillion, 2010), an originally 'European' policy area. When the European Commission attempts to keep the process intact despite national hindrances, the sentiment it creates in member states is that it tries to override national concerns. Such an attitude by member states creates even more populist and nationalistic rhetoric against Brussels, and undermines the potential for a credible enlargement policy pursued by the EU institutions.

### ***The decreasing power of European institutions***

The described lack of European enthusiasm depicted as enlargement fatigue created in turn what has been called 'accession fatigue' among candidate countries (Vilyanova, 2016). The lacking belief that they will become EU members in any foreseeable future makes these countries perceive any efforts for approximation with the EU as 'unworthy'.

This accession fatigue was intensified by the Juncker Commission's proclamation that there would not be a new round of EU enlargement during its term of office. The Commission's lack of commitment led to individual member states gaining political control of the process. Even though the problems encountered by candidate countries would have made imminent enlargement rather improbable anyway, the early announcement of this halt to the EU's widening at the stage of portfolio distribution has left the European Commission without an assertive role in the enlargement process. This also resulted in an erosion of its role as the driver of the EU's enlargement policy (Hillion, 2015). Despite the Commission's efforts to make the evaluations of candidate countries more transparent and understandable, the technicalities of the process are actually adding to the accession fatigue among both the publics and politicians of the candidate countries.

While securing the political careers of some European leaders, the remarks about who should be allowed into the EU and by when created a tectonic shift in enlargement countries. Candidate country governments have no incentives to apply 'European standards' of border security, since this would only further alienate their national and regional backgrounds. As a result, enlargement loses its credibility both as a tool of EU's foreign policy towards its immediate European vicinity and as an ongoing aim of European integration. The move of European leaders to close the enlargement debate for some time in 2014 thus provided for an unhealthy discourse. Acting responsibly and elevating the credibility of the decision-making process for admitting new members could help build a better political environment.

## Conclusions and policy recommendations

In the current context, the European Commission is signalling renewed attention and commitment towards the Western Balkan countries. This should be supported by academia, artists, and civil society organisations to uphold the European project on a wider scale. Some concrete steps could support this process. First, enlargement should become an individual policy area again, separate from the European Neighbourhood Policy. Second, considerable energy should be devoted to including widening and 'enlargement policy' in debates on the future of Europe (Drajij & Rudan, 2017). EU institutions and decision-makers need to actively face the fear that the next enlargement presents. Avoidance does not make problems disappear. Third, it should be remembered that

political decision-makers themselves construct agendas and the dominant rhetoric. Just as Euro-sceptics make their case, pro-integration circles should also speak up, both in the member states and in the candidate countries. A new rhetoric embodying a mission for a better common future involving the EU and the candidate countries may be in order. Last, but not least, Europe should continue to be a project that unites and does not discriminate. In times as these, more Europe for more people, and not less Europe for less people, is the solution. If designed to become a solution to the problem of security via solidarity against terror and joint migration management, 'enlargement' can once again become the policy area creating the solution, rather than the problem, in the European integration process.

## Further Reading

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