

# Europe's xhiro – the EU enlargement process

*EU enlargement was one of the main topics on the agenda at the European Political Community summit in Granada on 5 October. **Lea Ypi** writes that much like an Albanian xhiro, Europe continues to go round in circles over the issue.*

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When I was growing up in the 1980s in communist Albania, there was very little to do in warm summer evenings except for the *xhiro*. The *xhiro* (pronounced *jee-ro* and derived from the Latin *girare* or the ancient Greek γύροϛ, literally going round in circles) was what other Europeans might more dispassionately call a *passeggiata*, or a *promenade*, or a *Spazierengang*. But there was more to the *xhiro* than any of these words can capture: a ritual of hope and resilience, as if you did not care that there was nothing else to do apart from the *xhiro*, as if among the myriad of non-existent alternative activities, the *xhiro* was the best in any case.

What did the *xhiro* involve? In the case of my hometown, Durrës, on the Adriatic coast, people would wear their best clothes and, as soon as the sun set, stroll through the city centre until they reached the waterfront. But explaining where the *xhiro* culminated is somewhat misleading. One risks making it sound as if it had a purpose: to go somewhere, or to meet someone, or to get something done. The truth is: there was none. The *xhiro* was an end in itself. It had its own rules, its own symbolism, even its own rhythms. Not too fast (since that would have implied one was trying to arrive somewhere) nor too slow (since that would have provoked a human congestion and caused everyone to stop).

In many ways, the *xhiro* was like the European enlargement process. It went on forever, it went on in circles, and the question of where exactly it was going seemed like a singularly inappropriate one to ask. In its circularity, in its predictability, in its formulaic monotony, it was both hopeless and hopeful, joyfully defiant and miserably resigned.

But there are also other elements that make me think about Europe in connection to these youthful strolls. In Durrës, going out for the *xhiro* was like taking an imaginary tour

through European history. One would typically walk past a small, run-down, archaeological site, where broken columns evoked the ancient days in which the city was called Epidamnos, a name the Romans later changed perhaps because there was something of the *damnos* – or damnation in it.

The exiled oligarchs of Epidamnos feature prominently in Thucydides' [Peloponnesian War](#), one of the foundational texts of European civilisation, and one of the first lessons about power and realism in the international realm. They also feature in Aristotle's [Politics](#) as an example of the degeneration of oligarchic rule: the rich turning against the poor, the poor wresting control from the rich, the birth of demagogues. Power, wealth, realpolitik: if that all sounds familiar, it's because the cultural heritage of Europe is made of universal values but also of universal violations.

## Violations and values

Just a little beyond the ruins, there was a Roman amphitheatre (or half an amphitheatre, since the rest is still buried underground, in hope that one day it might be resurrected by EU funds). It is the largest amphitheatre in the Balkans, built by emperor Traianus in the second century AD. Although, to be more specific, Traianus only commissioned the works; the stones were laid by nameless slaves. It is not just that violations and values, coexist, it is that sometimes one is a pre-requisite for the other.

Further into the *xhiro*, just behind the amphitheatre there were the city's Byzantine walls, erected after an earthquake by the eastern emperor Anastasius Dicorus, himself born and raised in the city. And on the other side of the wall, there was the Venetian tower, from the time in which Durrës was known as the Duchy of Durazzo, a colony of the Republic of Venice recovered from the Normans, later contested between the Anjous, the Serbs and the Hungarians, before the conflict was decisively resolved with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. Of which, oddly there are only a few traces: an old mosque, converted to a youth centre during the communists' forcible embrace of atheism, some houses, a couple of shops.

When the Cold War ended, everything changed. The *xhiro* became longer. It took people beyond the archaeological ruins, beyond the city walls, beyond the water, into a different part of Europe, into the European Union. European soldiers, once mobilised to conquer foreign lands, were now policing its outer borders. European institutions became

preoccupied by the question of whether these new, aspiring, Europeans were the same as the old successful ones. Did they deserve to come? Did they have valid claims to travel? On what grounds could they settle? Were their values compatible with European ones?\*

## **Albania and Europe**

When I am asked if Albania deserves to be *in* Europe, I think of my walk through Durrës and it makes me smile. It has been hard to keep *out* of it in the last few thousand years. Both from the good and from the bad. But the question is revealing of the attitude of those who pose it, equating the ideals of Europe with the reality of EU institutions, Brussels with universal emancipation, the enlargement process with an obstacle course set up by Europe's deserving, successful member states to its (at best) incompetent (at worst) corrupt aspiring counterparts.

In October 2022, after [an official visit to Tirana](#) following the opening of accession negotiations, Albanians were relieved to hear EU commissioner Ursula von der Leyen declare during a press conference: "Albania has done its homework". There you have it, all the struggles of the EU and all the torment of the enlargement process in one metaphor.

There is the simplest formulation of a distorted relation: the relation not between equals but of the student to the teacher, of those who have wisdom to impart over those who have lessons to learn, of sticks and carrots, of sanctions and rewards. Can one really "teach" freedom and democracy? And are these the kinds of lessons that current EU states are best placed to impart?

At least candidate countries have homework to do. What about the EU? Its values are well-known: human rights, human dignity, rule of law, equality, freedom, democracy, respect for minorities. They are so passionately taught to candidate states, and so eagerly endorsed in pre-accession leaders' speeches, they would turn into a believer even the most unyielding of cynics. The reality is more complicated.

One cannot lecture on human rights whilst withdrawing funding for humanitarian projects (as Italy has recently demanded). One cannot preach human dignity while letting people drown in the Mediterranean. One cannot praise the rule of law while systematically

orchestrating assaults on courts (enter Poland and Hungary).

The sad truth is that on all these matters, ideals are very far from reality, and the EU agenda is, if not set, then dragged by the far right. The left, the liberals, the greens, the centre, simply take comfort in the fact that it is not as all bad as it could be (spoiler: it is as bad as the resistance that it encounters).

The image that the EU has traditionally projected on candidate states – principled, confident, purposeful – is the inverse of how it appears from the inside. Scholars used to debate its internal lack of democracy, the issue has now become one of basic survival.

But the questions of external enlargement and internal reform are not as separate as they seem. As right-wing parties win elections in one member state after another, and as leftwing parties increasingly parrot them, the project is shaken to its core. What kind of EU will emerge from the current crisis? For all we know, it might be one that mirrors the *Zeitgeist*: politically authoritarian, culturally essentialist, exclusionary to the point of cruelty.

### **The EU's survival**

What, under these circumstances, is the point of discussing enlargement as if we were in an era of normal politics? What is the purpose of business as usual: keeping to deadlines, comparing the cases of Ukraine and the Western Balkans, establishing targets and enforcing priorities? The EU has never before looked more helpless. Surely, the focus should be not on what it can teach to expand, but on how it can learn to survive.

But that requires a new approach to the process of both enlargement and integration: examining them as not two problems but one. It requires interacting with candidate countries not as subordinates but as partners, not as passive subjects but as equal agents.

For decades now, the enlargement process has, yes, tried to enhance democracy in candidate states but it has also impoverished it. On the one hand, the prospect of EU integration kept hope alive both in the EU and outside, it gave citizens a sense of purpose, a vision of the future amidst the complete collapse of faith in ideologies. On the

other hand, while the EU encouraged adherence to abstract principles, it reduced the space for principled exchange.

It encouraged the rule of law, but it distracted from structural critiques. If social ills are now all blamed on the “corruption” of domestic elites (as if it were only outside the EU that corruption could be found), it is in no small part due to the hegemony of the EU’s enlargement discourse. The implication was that there are no bad rules, only bad people. The result is that people in the region can only contemplate politicians (*all* politicians) as thieves.

Of course, something like that is now also the case in the EU. That simply illustrates how much the times have changed. The process of outward enlargement cannot remain immune to what happens on the inside. Those who resist the current EU, who are lured by the right, do not resist it because it is too woke, or too cosmopolitan. Very simply, and very reasonably I should add, they resist it because it fails to represent them.

It is this representative gap that is filled by the far right, turning it into an either/or question: either “you” or “them”, either “Europe” or the “state”, either the “migrant” or the “white worker”. The problem of the EU is not that it is transnational but that it is not transnational enough, that it is transnational only for the elite. The notion that we are all equal in making the laws we are required to obey (or the EU regulations we comply with) is so plainly false in a world of structural economic and political divides, that it is both surprising and unfortunate that it has become a rallying cry only for the right.

## **Democratic reform**

In Plato’s Republic, democracy is likened to a constitutional bazaar. People possess so much freedom that they can choose any form of rule as the foundation of the political community: rule by the people (democracy), rule by the rich (oligarchy), rule by the best (aristocracy) and, when democracy deteriorates, rule by tyrants.

Plato, as is well known, was not a democrat, his remarks were intended as a warning. But there is something to his criticism that makes one think about the EU, another sort of constitutional bazaar. The European Parliament resembles rule by the people, the European Central Bank echoes rule by the rich, the Commission and the European Court of Justice represent rule by the best (or the experts) and the Council combines

elements of all these.

This blend of elements makes the agenda for transforming the EU particularly challenging. In the case of nation-states, the nominal presence of sovereignty is what gives the illusion of popular control: politics becomes once more the space of freedom. The institutions of the EU have only policy to go by. And so, good policy ideas keep floating around: [a European Green Deal](#), [a common European migration policy](#), and (when things go well) a progressive taxation scheme. But as we have recently seen, good policies are threatened by bad politics.

The EU has never before been more vulnerable to the fluctuating politics of its member states (Brexit was only a first warning sign). This is why coming up with good policies – including policies on enlargement – can no longer be enough. Good policies do not defend themselves: they also require human agency. Genuine change in the EU requires developing a pan-European movement that advocates for properly inclusive, radically egalitarian policies, a set of rules and institutions that practice the freedom and equality they preach.

The problem of the external expansion of the EU cannot be separated from that of its internal reform. But we won't make progress if we get bogged down in debates on which countries will join the EU first, what is the most likely accession date, who will be second, who will come next. What is needed instead, is decisive *political* action, and the clarity of sight that characterised its founding fathers: a new economic vision able to transcend the limits of capitalism, and political institutions capable of giving citizens proper democratic representation. In short, a new transnational economic model combined with a new transnational political one.

Europe is at a decisive turning point. It can either be shaped by the right, which will ultimately destroy it from within, or it will have to go on a different walk from the usual, one that prioritises not what it has to teach others but what it must learn for the ideal to survive.

## **Europe's xhiro**

At the end of my walk in Durrës, one would reach an area informally known to older generations as the Volga (after the Soviet-inspired name of an old hotel) and to us

children as *Rezistenca*, or resistance square, after a communist memorial celebrating Albania's resistance to the fascist invasion during World War II.

The memorial consisted of several ascending concrete steps (often used by children as slides), leading up to a large socialist sculpture of an unidentified soldier. His gaze was fixed on the Adriatic Sea, and there was something longing, almost melancholic in the expression of his eyes. But his hands were firmly up, holding a gun pointed towards Italy, on the other side. It was a plastic image of both violence and desire.

Yet nobody took any notice. The people of Durrës would walk around the memorial as if in a procession, absorbed by their daily preoccupations, hardly glancing at it, far less pausing to observe. This too has something of the EU. An endless procession around the past. A past that is simply a landmark. We never stop, never look up, never think. It just lays there like a stone-cold bronze statue, with its most important lessons both hiding from view and in plain sight.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Union](#)*

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