Chapter 2
EU Enlargement Rounds and Dilemmas:
The Successful, the Reluctant, the Awkward, and the Laggards

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ABSTRACT

This chapter adopts both a historical and a comparative approach in studying EU enlargement. The aim here is to identify 'whether' and 'when' a country joins the Union, with an emphasis on the currently ongoing enlargement process in the Western Balkans. It starts with an overview of the conceptual and theoretical framework for studying and explaining EU enlargement. It then reviews how EU enlargement has proceeded over time by looking at its successful and unsuccessful cases, with a particular focus on the motivations and explanations associated with each of them. The chapter considers the successful rounds of enlargement, the reluctant and the awkward cases, and the ongoing (laggard) Southeastern Enlargement round. It discusses the main EU enlargement dilemmas and their implications for the current (unfinished) enlargement round in the Western Balkans in detail.

INTRODUCTION

Since the foundation of the European Economic Community (EEC), there have been several rounds of European Union (EU) enlargement. EU enlargement has been a very dynamic process with periodic ups and downs, diverse historical experiences, geographical nuances, and political priorities. The widening of the EU evolved in parallel with the deepening of European integration and took the lead when (vertical) European integration stagnated (Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig, 2013, p. 21). The process and the study of EU enlargement has received particular attention after the Cold War, becoming a permanent fully-fledged EU policy area and a distinct research focus of European studies (Schimmelfennig

& Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 500). The predominant approach in EU enlargement studies, however, has been to look at short time spans and singular rounds of enlargement. Only a few studies pay greater attention to the historical and comparative aspects of enlargement developments over time, across rounds and in comparison with other regional organisations (e.g. Wallace, 2002; Murray, Warleigh-Lack & Baogang, 2014; Kaiser & Elvert 2004; Ikonomou, Andry & Byberg, 2017).

This chapter adopts both a historical and a comparative approach in studying EU enlargement, as the process has unfolded over time and evolved over the different rounds. Studying EU enlargement historically and comparatively allows for systematically revealing the context, the range of factors explaining each round, and the dilemmas and tensions the process manifests. The aim here is to determine the factors behind 'whether' and 'when' a country joins the union, emphasising the ongoing accession process with the countries of the Western Balkans.

Analytically, this chapter distinguishes between rounds and groups of countries, considering the timespan, geography, and attitudes towards enlargement. Each enlargement round is bound to a particular time period and region of Europe, with particularities that are similar within but distinct across rounds (Schimmelfennig, 2014). In each round of enlargement, the acceding states come from a specific European region (with significant shared characteristics and linkages) and negotiate membership in approximately the same time period (negotiations and membership happen at either precisely the same time or at times that have not been too far apart) (Nugent, 2017, p. 55).[1] The chapter also makes an analytical distinction between the groups of countries, according to their ability, willingness, and commitment to membership. It thus differentiates between the successful, the reluctant, the laggards, and the awkward states. Successful enlargement candidates are those states which have been able and willing to join the EU. The reluctant states – those able but not willing to join – are hesitant to adopt full membership and usually search for limited integration in only specific policy areas. The laggards, meanwhile, are willing to become members but remain unable to join. The chapter also considers a fourth category in addition to the groupings formed by combinations of the states' willingness and ability: the 'awkward' candidate, or state which may be willing or able to join and participate, but still lacks full commitment to the goals of the Union (see Murray, Warleigh-Lack & Baogang, 2014). This more nuanced description of the groups of states puts EU enlargement in a larger perspective of continuous interactions with a variety of ultimate outcomes (successful, failed, incomplete) beyond the simple dichotomy of full membership or non-membership.

The chapter starts with an overview of the conceptual and theoretical framework for studying and explaining EU enlargement. It then reviews how EU enlargement has proceeded over time through its successful and unsuccessful cases, with a particular focus on the motivations and explanations associated with them. The three main sections here look at the successful rounds of enlargement, the reluctant and the awkward cases, and the ongoing (laggard) Southeastern European enlargement round respectively. Finally, it discusses the main dilemmas for EU enlargement and their implications for the current (unfinished) enlargement round in the countries of the Western Balkans.

UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLAINING EU ENLARGEMENT

Enlargement is not simply a numerical increase of the member states of the European Union. It is rather the process of extending the geographic scope of the political and legal *acquis* to third countries that want to join the EU. Enlargement is a *process of gradual and formal horizontal institutionalisation of*

organisational rules and norms, thus being best understood not as a one-off event but rather as a process of establishing special institutional relationships (e.g. the stabilisation and association process, negotiation process) through formal agreements (e.g. Stabilisation and Association Agreement, European Economic Area Agreement, Treaty of Accession) which extends community institutions and policies beyond EU members during and after the country's accession as a member state (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002, p. 601).

Defining EU enlargement as a *gradual process* of *formal institutionalisation* implies continuous interactions and pressure for transformations that can vary based on the degree of association. The transformations may be deliberate or (quasi-)mechanical (Olsen 2002, p. 927), technical or of a political nature (Dimitrova, 2020), and they need to be implemented (although asymmetrically) by both parties, the candidate country and the EU (Jano, 2009, p. 69-70). In the stricter sense, enlargement refers to the EU accession of new members including accession strategies, conditions and procedures (practical/policy usage) and accession membership, e.g. the date of accession and transition periods, according to the treaty on European Union (institutional/legal usage). Yet EU enlargement is a more complex and continuous interaction with many possible endings besides full membership (Ikonomou, Andry & Byberg, 2017, p. 6). Although it is often associated with the uniform extension of the EU's jurisdiction to non-member countries that successfully conclude accession membership, not all states have reached or opted for full membership; some member-states have 'opt-outs' from certain EU policies[2] or have even exited the Union entirely (the case of the UK in 2020), while other non-member countries (e.g. Norway, Switzerland) have 'opt-ins' to integrate into certain EU policy areas without getting EU membership (Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig, 2013, p. 15). Thus, in a broader sense enlargement also refers to horizontal integration, i.e. the gradual territorial extension of the EU and its integrated policy regimes beyond the membership outcome and uniformity (Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2006, p.73). Horizontal integration, like EU accession, refers to a process whereby new states subject themselves to the EU *acquis,* yet leave the door open for (an external dimension of) differentiated integration and instances that do not reach the level of full EU membership (Tekin, 2021, p. 161). It is possible to talk of rather an increase (integration) or reduction (disintegration) in the horizontal integration towards EU membership, which may be applied to all states equally (no differentiation) or unequally (differentiated), and in principle, explain successful EU accession and the reluctance and exclusion of membership with the same theoretical framework (Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig, p. 8; Schimmelfennig, 2018, pp. 1155-1156).

The key to explaining EU enlargement touches on two fundamental questions: 'whether' an applicant country will join the union, that is, what are the driving motivations of (non)enlargement; and 'when' it will join, that is, the time of accession membership.

On the question of *whether* an applicant country joins the EU, the focus in the literature has been on identifying the decisive actors and their driving logic for enlargement. The theoretical debate has been dominated by intergovernmentalism and supranationalism, with their respective variants of realist or liberal intergovernmentalism and the rationalist or constructivist supranationalism (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2006; Schimmelfennig & Rittberger, 2006). Realism (intergovernmentalism) emphasises security, arguing that membership increases safety and brings a more balanced distribution of power within the EU. On the other hand, liberal intergovernmentalism argues that the countries' (economic) benefits of joining the union are at least equal to the costs of enlargement. Rational supranational institutionalism, on the other hand, instead of a state-centred standpoint, focuses on the benefits of the Union as a whole. In this understanding, the economic incentives alone do not justify membership, but

they suffice for a Customs Union relationship, as in the case of the European Free Trade Association with Norway and Switzerland. Constructivist supranationalism, based on identity, argues that both the EU and the candidate country should share the same norms and values (Sjursen, 2002). The normative claim of the reunification of Europe was the main discourse during the Eastern enlargement round. The security-geopolitical concerns, economic incentives, and normative-identity claims are important explanatory factors to understand the motivations associated with the question of 'why' enlargement should take place, but they cannot explain the *time* when accession membership happens.

To fully explain enlargement, we need to consider not only the motivations behind enlargement but also the aspects and uses of time (timing, temporality, tempo) in the sequence of events that led to EU enlargement (see Avery, 2009, p. 265). In the constructivist perspective, the candidate countries should comply with the EU conditionality of having a consolidated democracy, a functioning market economy, and the administrative capacity to adopt the EU *acquis*. Thus, the more democratic a country is, the more likely it is to establish institutionalised relations and be admitted to the European Union. Whereas, according to the liberal intergovernmentalism approach, EU enlargement is explained mainly by the preferences of the potential member states. This is especially true if considering the re-nationalisation of EU enlargement policy and the decisive role played by the member state in the Council of the European Union, not only with regard to their political conduct but also the procedural aspects (Hillion, 2010, p. 215). On the other side, historical institutionalism offers considerable insights into the time-factor of EU enlargement, given that enlargement is not just a snapshot event, but unfolds over time and thus varies in *timing* (when the process starts), *tempo* (how long it takes), and *temporality* (various transitional measures) (see Bulmer, 2009, p.308). From a historical institutionalist approach, EU enlargement is becoming more path-dependent, where temporal events and a series of sequential issues and decisions are increasingly embedded in the formal procedures and structures of EU enlargement policy, making the process self-reinforcing and rather difficult to reverse (Giandomenico, 2009).[3]

Thus, EU enlargement has no rigid theoretical framework, rather it is a more pluralistic and inclusive perspective of a combination of material (rational choice), ideational (constructivist), and time (historical) factors that help explain the different cases and timespans, and the individual (cross-)rounds of enlargement (Kaiser & Elvert, 2004, p. 8).

THE DECADES OF THE SUCCESSFUL (MULTIPLE) THREES

The historical development of EU enlargement has been a recurrent trend of pooling (a multiple of) three neighbour countries, from the same geographic proximity and socio-political context, each decade. The EU has preferred to negotiate with defined groups of European states that already had close relations and issue linkages with each other, e.g. pre-existing trade and political cooperation (Preston, 1995, pp. 456-457).

The 'core EU' was initially founded in 1951[4] by the three large European states (France, West Germany, and Italy) and the three small states of the Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxemburg) who perceived the nation-state to be, at best, obsolete economically and, at worst, politically dangerous (Moxon-Browne, 2004, p. 70) and therefore committed to build a regional community based principally on removing trade barriers and aspiring to develop and promote a community of 'European' values. Each decade since then, the six founding member states have successfully accepted the membership of

(multiples of) three new European counties, enlarging to the north, south, and east of the continent (see Table 1).

Northwestern (Anglo-Scandinavian) Enlargement (first round). In the '70s, the European Economic Community firstly enlarged towards the northwest of Europe. The accession of Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom in 1973, although peculiar, it is not in every respect unique. The EEC was perceived by the UK as an increasingly strong political and economic entity in world trade and politics (Kaiser, 2004, p. 26). For Denmark, the motives for EEC membership were the benefits of free trade, especially for Danish agriculture and industrial exports (Laursen, 2004, p. 43). For Ireland, meanwhile, EEC membership was primarily perceived as freedom of manoeuvre to overcome its historical dependence and ambiguous relationship with the neighbouring UK (Moxon-Browne, 2004, pp. 67-68). In all three cases, institutional and sovereignty matters were of growing importance (Laursen 2004, p. 50). The 'Luxembourg Compromise' (1966), which safeguarded unanimous voting on questions of vital national interest, was a positive input also for the public and the governments of the northwestern countries, easing their concerns about losing national sovereignty and starting to prepare their application for membership (Moxon-Browne, 2004, p. 63-64). Overall, the accession of the Anglo-Scandinavian group was not easy, and the countries had to overcome two French vetoes. Their motivation for membership was largely government-driven, mainly for pragmatic national interests and functional reasons of adaptation to the rapid European economic and political changes. At best, their 'pull' towards European integration could be explained by the inter-governmentalist rationale of the nation-state's interest to optimise national opportunities and solve issues in an inter-governmental consociational European community.

Southern (Mediterranean) Enlargement (second round). In the '80s, the EEC expanded to the south of Europe, with the three less wealthy and formerly political authoritarian countries of Greece, Spain, and Portugal. Although the demand for southern enlargement emerged as early as the 1960s, their accession to EEC lasted almost three decades, until the dictatorships in the three Mediterranean countries collapsed and they established democratic governments and socio-economic modernisation.[5] The EEC's political decision to halt association and accession agreements with Greece, Spain, and Portugal was due to their incompatibility with the values of democracy and human rights values that the European community sought to protect and promote (Ekiert, 2008, p. 2) The southern case set the normative basis that shaped decision-making on enlargement, providing support for the constructivist arguments of norms and identity (Verney, 2006) and the growing role of supranational actors (e.g. European parliamentarians and trade union activists) in altering state preferences (e.g. those of France and Germany) (Thomas, 2006, pp. 1206-1207). The southern enlargement round was considered not only a successful transition to democracy and socio-economic modernisation, but also a geopolitical accomplishment, preventing the Mediterranean countries from potentially slipping into the Soviet bloc (De Angelis & Karamouzi, 2016).

North (EFTA) Enlargement (third round). In the mid-90s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the EU enlarged with three 'easy' countries (highly developed economies and well-established social democracies) which were EFTA members (Austria, Sweden, and Finland).[6] The EU accession of the three EFTA countries was both a rational choice of economic and political interest as well as a normative vocation given their (then Western) European identity. Yet, the timing of their full EU membership was a realist choice bound to the geopolitical/security concerns which had been a strong inhibitor during the Cold War era and an impetus afterwards. The EFTA countries had had friendly relations and close cooperation with the EEC in many policy sectors since the 1960s. Yet membership in the community's early days was mainly conditioned by external factors and the interaction with external geopolitical settings. This

meant, firstly, their (partial) siding or cooperation with Nazi Germany during the Second World War, and secondly their particular location in between East and West, with the Soviet stance of vetoing their accession (Austria) or threatening consequences if they joined (Finland and Sweden) during the Cold War (see: Gehler, 2004, p. 145; Ojanen, 2004, p. 162; Gussarsson, 2004, p. 194). The country's rapprochement with the EU took a new turn in the '90s after the Soviet threat had vanished and the importance of their traditional neutrality had diminished, favouring more supranational cooperation instead. This is therefore a case supporting the theoretical argument that national preferences on enlargement are not stable over time but can be changed by external factors during critical junctures (e.g., the collapse of the Soviet Union).

Eastern ('Big Bang') Enlargement (fourth round). In the 2000s, the EU continued to successfully expand further to the east with the 'Big Bang' enlargement, accepting ten countries of the former Eastern bloc (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria) and the two Mediterranean islands of Malta and Cyprus.[7] According to constructivist arguments, the 'Big Bang' enlargement was desired by both the EU and the Eastern countries, to unify Europe and end the East-West division of the iron curtain. Moreover, the Eastern post-communist countries had strong material incentives in terms of access to financial aid and the community market, although their fast-tracked accession was expected to put a strain on the EU's institutions, policies, and budget. The politics and the decision to expand Europe to the East were driven by pragmatic interests and idealistic motivations alike. Eastern enlargement is mainly explained in terms of the preferences of the member states and the applicants (liberal intergovernmentalism, e.g. Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003), but also considering the normative context created by European identity and values (factors emphasised in constructivism, e.g. Sjursen, 2002). The EU membership decision offered to all eastern candidate countries was ultimately the result of *rhetorical actions and entrapment*, a hybrid mechanism of the (politically) strategic use of norm-based arguments to legitimise Eastern accession and counter self-interest preferences through appeals for commitments to the community's shared ideas and values (Schimmelfennig, 2001).

EU ENLARGEMENT DILEMMAS: THE RELUCTANT AND THE AWKWARD PARTNERS

EU enlargement has not always been a success story. Some European states, despite their involvement in the process, have remained rather reluctant to move forward with full membership or did not fully commit to the European integration project.

- **The Reluctant States**: Norway's first application for membership in the '60s (1961 and 1967) was set aside following the French rejection of the UK's membership. Its later membership perspectives (in 1972 and 1994) were rejected in national referendums. The country's reluctance towards supranational integration is mainly associated with the fear of losing Norwegian identity, which has had a constant struggle for political independence (due to geo-historical constraints), a romanticised image of the traditional way of life, and a highly subsidised welfare model (domestic constraints) (Gstöhl, 2005, p. 42-44). Norway is by far the most sectorally and institutionally integrated non-member state, though maintaining its *de jure* constitutional sovereignty. Switzerland, another reluctant European, rejected the membership application in 1992 by referendum and in

Table 1. EU Enlargement rounds: The successful decades of groups of (multiples of) three

Round	Foundation	1st Enlargement	2nd Enlargement	3rd Enlargement	4th Enlargement	5th Enlargement*
Decade / *(Year)*	'50s *(1952 -1958)*	'70s *(1973)*	'80s *(1981; 1986)*	'90s *(1995)*	2000s *(2004; 2007)*	2010s *(2013)*
EC/EU Size	EC-6	EC-9	EC-12	EU-15	EU-27	EU-28
European Geography *(& Linkages)*	Core	Northwestern *(Anglo-Scandinavian)*	Southern *(Mediterranean)*	Northern *(EFTA)*	Eastern *('Big Bang'***)*	Southeastern
Number of Countries	3 large & 3 small	plus 3	plus 3	plus 3	plus 12	plus 1
Countries' Names	France West Germany Italy Belgium Netherlands Luxemburg	Denmark Ireland United Kingdom**	Greece Portugal Spain	Austria Finland Sweden	Cyprus Czech Republic Estonia Hungary Latvia Lithuania Malta Poland Slovakia Slovenia Bulgaria Romania	Croatia

Source: Authors' compilation

Note: *The fifth (southeastern) enlargement is not completed yet, as only Croatia has successfully joined. ** The UK withdrew from the EU in 2020. *** see Endnote 7.

2016 the country withdrew its application, arguing that EU membership would have repercussions on the Swiss model of federalism, direct democracy, and neutrality, all important elements of the Swiss identity (normative arguments) (Gstöhl, 2005, p. 44). For Liechtenstein, a very small European state, the EU membership faces primarily the issue of "not being compatible with its size" both in terms of an adequate representation in the EU institutions and decision-making setup and of its ability to fulfil all obligations and implement the entire *acquis* (domestic constraints) (Frommelt & Gstöhl, 2011, p. 47). Yet, Liechtenstein is intensely embedded in European integration, having signed the Agreement on the European Economic Area (1992). Iceland applied for EU membership in 2009 and began accession negotiations one year later. Before the start of the accession procedure, Iceland had already incorporated most of the *acquis* chapters into its legislation through the Agreement on the European Economic Area (1994). In December 2013, the Icelandic government requested to put accession negotiations on hold, and in 2015 it dropped out of EU accession negotiations. The main reason for its EU membership failure was the vision of the conservative-nationalistic government, its protectionist policies regarding the country's primary economic sectors (fisheries and agriculture), and its reliance on U.S. territorial security (Thorhallsson, 2018).

The reluctant – the able but not-willing-to-join – countries of Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein face major domestic political obstacles on their road towards EU membership. Over time, they have aimed at different degrees and various levels of horizontal integration with the EU to reduce negative externalities resulting from their decision to stay outside the Union (intergovernmentalism

ideas). Their high interdependence with the EU and their concerns of marginalisation or of being left behind explain why Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein participate in the EU's internal market and the Schengen Area – sectors that also enjoy a consensus among their Eurosceptic public (Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig, 2013, p. 140). Yet the selective horizontal integration of the reluctant Europeans is not without costs, as they are generally in a weak, unfavourable institutional and material bargaining position (Schimmelfennig, 2018, p. 1161).

- **The Awkward Partners**: Coined by George (1992) with others to follow, 'awkwardness' refers to a country's long history of a strained and uneasy relationship with the EU and its lack of full belonging and commitment to the European project. The awkward partners, deliberatively or inadvertently, have either decided to stay outside the mainstream due to their historical, cultural, economic, or geopolitical distinctiveness, or are perceived as such (Murray, Warleigh-Lack & Baogang, 2014). The UK, although one of the first countries to successfully join the EU, has often been considered as the archetype of an 'awkward partner' in the European integration process, because of its cultural identity, domestic politics, and power relations (Murray, Warleigh-Lack & Baogang, 2014, p. 282). The UK's reputation as an awkward partner has been persistent, long before the country formally joined the European Community, but it received more relevance especially after the UK rejected EU membership in a referendum and withdraw its membership in 2020. The UK's withdrawal from the Union, facilitated by the rise of a more Eurosceptic party and the occurrence of a referendum, re-emphasises the importance of national sovereignty and identity (Schimmelfennig, 2018, p. 1157).

Turkey has been also another difficult case to deal with, because of its cultural traditions and identity, its domestic politics and policies, and its relationship with other partners. Turkey is one of the earliest applicants to join the EU. It submitted its application for association with the European Community in 1959, and in 1963 the (Ankara) Association Agreement acknowledged Turkey as a "European" country with the possibility of EU accession. In 1987, Turkey's application for full membership was rejected, and only in 1999 did the country receive official candidacy status. Yet Turkey was excluded from the Eastern enlargement wave and accession negotiations were only opened in 2005. In July 2019, the European Council decided to suspend accession talks with Turkey due to concerns about human rights and civil liberties, political pressure on the judiciary, and unresolved territorial disputes with Cyprus and other neighbouring countries. There is an image of confrontational relations between Turkey and the EU, and further integration is seen with scepticism and many reservations. The many factors inhibiting Turkey's membership concern its unstable and illiberal democracy (political), the strongly increased cultural diversity its membership would entail because of its largely Muslim society (cultural), the poor and more agricultural economy (socio-economic), its importance in decision-making because of the large size of its population (power-related), and the low public and political support in the member state (political) (Schimmelfennig, 2021). More than in any other enlargement case, Turkey's membership is becoming a never-ending endeavour with many uncertainties and an almost "dead case" without a credible accession perspective (Lippert, 2021, p. 286). Such a long-lasting awkward relationship has raised concerns about replacing the accession framework with alternative forms of partnerships.[8]

SOUTHEASTERN ENLARGEMENT AND THE ONGOING ACCESSION: THE LAGGARDS

The last wave of successful EU enlargement was in the 2010s, with only Croatia succeeding in gaining EU membership. The accession process of the rest of the Western Balkan countries is still ongoing, albeit at a different pace.[9]

In the case of the Western Balkans, the drivers of enlargement could be grouped into three broad categories of reasoning. The first and most important motivation follows a realist (intergovernmentalist) perspective of geostrategic calculation. The security factor in the case of the Western Balkans has both an inner dimension – providing regional reconciliation and stability – and an external dimension, namely reducing the intensifying geopolitical influences of Russia and China.[10] Further delays in the accession process could have several negative externalities, with spillover effects over potential crises within the region. The economic incentives are the second major driver, with its liberal intergovernmentalist variant of providing access to the EU common market and budget to the countries of the Western Balkans. The EU is the leading trade partner in the region, accounting for almost 70% of its total trade, while the region's share of the overall EU trade is very low (only 1.4%).[11] Still, it could be argued that the economic costs of enlargement are smaller than the non-enlargement EU financial contribution during the '90s (rational supranational reasoning).[12] The third argument, underlining the return to Europe and the share of common identity and values (constructivist supranationalism), has been less prominent in the case of the Western Balkans. Empirical studies show that political transformation and the presence of liberal-democratic values are important necessary conditions (Schwarz, 2016), yet not sufficient for accession membership (Jano, 2014). EU membership has only partially succeeded in consolidating the democratic systems in the region, and its credibility as a successful soft-power model in the region is being questioned.

The countries of the Western Balkans are the 'laggards' when considering 'time' (timing, temporality, and tempo) in their progress towards EU accession. Firstly, the timing (when the process starts/ occurs) of the EU enlargement process matters. The challenge of the Western Balkan countries is that they are seeking to join a Union substantially more integrated and expanded than it had been in previous rounds, starting from a lower economic and democratic ground (a result of timing). Secondly, the temporality (the nature, significance, and relative importance of the various 'transitional measures') for the southeastern countries is different from any preceding case. Although EU enlargement policy is an 'updated version' previously applied in the earlier enlargement rounds, it has yet to introduce mechanisms to steer and restrain the enlargement process at all stages and at any time. Unlike in the previous enlargement rounds, the current accession negotiations are an 'open-ended' process with no membership guaranteed beforehand; even though a country may open and close negotiations on different groupings of the *acquis* chapters (according to the new methodology as of 2020), the accession time may not be specified and other exemptions may restrict membership entitlement (Ugur, 2010, p. 968). The new methodology providing instruments for phasing the negotiations through time, and the additional pre-accession requirement to resolve existing 'open issues' with EU member states are all 'temporal devices' halting the process at any time and delaying accession. Finally, the tempo (how long it takes), or the time committed to the association and accession period, is much longer than initially anticipated and or of the previous enlargement rounds. The association of the aspiring countries with the EU took almost 20 years in the cases of the Southern and EFTA Enlargements and it was squeezed into a shorter period in the Eastern enlargement round (Preston, 1995, p. 459).[13] The time of accession negotiation, from the

Table 2. Southeastern Enlargement: Stabilisation and Association, Accession and Membership

Status	Stage Country	Opening SAA Negotiations	Signing SAA	SAA Enters Into Force	Application for Membership	Candidate Status Granted	Opening of Accession Negotiations	Closing Accession Negotiations	Membership
Member State	Croatia	Apr. 2000	Oct. 2001	Feb. 2005	Feb. 2003	Jun. 2004	Oct. 2005	Jun. 2011	Jul. 2013
Acceding	Montenegro	Sep. 2006	Oct. 2007	May 2010	Dec. 2008	Nov. 2010	Jun. 2012	--	--
	Serbia	Oct. 2005	Apr. 2008	Sep. 2013	Dec. 2009	Mar. 2012	Jan. 2014	--	--
Candidate	Albania	Jan. 2003	Jun. 2006	Apr. 2009	Apr. 2009	Jun. 2014	Jun. 2018*	--	--
	North Macedonia	Mar. 2000	Apr. 2001	Apr. 2004	Mar. 2004	Dec. 2005	Jun. 2018*	--	--
Potential candidate	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Jan. 2006	June 2008	Jun. 2015	Feb. 2016	--	--	--	--
	Kosovo	Oct. 2013	Oct. 2015	Apr. 2016	--	--	--	--	--

Source: Authors' compilation using European Commission data available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/check-current-status_en

Notes: SAA stands for Stabilisation and Association Agreement. * The EU has decided to open accession negotiation, but they have not started yet, nor has a date been set.

(formal) membership application to the accession treaty, varied substantially across enlargement rounds and candidate countries (from 3 to 13 years) (Schneider, 2009, p. 14).[14] Croatia, the 'successful laggard' of the Western Balkans, became a full EU member state after 13 years of association with the EU, having concluded the accession negotiations within 7 years.

COHABITATION WITH TENSIONS: AN ENGAGEMENT OF CONVENIENCE?

Historically, EU enlargement has often been confronted with several dilemmas, albeit pertinent and highlighted more in different rounds depending on the specific context, the geopolitics, and the socio-economic situation of either the EU or the applicant countries at the time.

First and foremost, from the very first enlargement until now, there has been a deep-rooted and in-escapable trade-off between 'deepening' (supranational centralisation) and 'widening' (expansion of membership), with a tendency to blame the most recent member states. Each enlargement round has been seen with the sceptic view of undermining further integration and, in a way, the *finalité politique* of the community (e.g. the first enlargement round including the UK, Denmark and Ireland), the Union's economic situation (e.g. the second enlargement to Southern Europe or the 'Big Bang' enlargement to Eastern Europe), some specific policy sectors (e.g. the development of a common defence policy with the accession of the neutral countries from EFTA) or even the balance-of-power within the union (the formation of a 'Germanic' bloc with Austrian accession, or the Visegrad group with Eastern enlargement) (see Kaiser & Elvert, 2004, p.2). Yet, studies have found that evidence of the general dilemma or long-term trade-off between deepening and widening does not seem to exist, since the EU has not expanded geographically at the cost of further institutional integration, and the further transfer of competences

to the EU has not deterred countries from joining (Leuffen, Rittberger & Schimmelfennig, 2013, p. 21; Kelemen, Menon & Slapin, 2014).[15] Moreover, other studies examining public attitudes have found that, in general, most EU citizens do not see or favour a trade-off between deeper integration and further enlargement. Contrary to widespread expectations, the public sees them as complementary rather than conflicting processes (Karp & Bowler, 2006; Ruiz-Jiménez & Torreblanca, 2008). Yet differences in the nature and the extent of this complementarity of preferences exist between countries. Citizens in several 'older' or 'more integrated' member states are more supportive of integration, whereas citizens of the 'newest' or 'outsider' member states are more supportive of enlargement, especially in the cases where elites speak clearly about the deepening-widening tensions (Hobolt, 2014).

Second, the issue of enlargement fatigue and political resistance has been noticed since the first rounds (with France vetoing the UK's accession twice, and the EU's later absorption capacity to admit Eastern European countries),[16] and they are currently dominating the Southeastern enlargement. After the Eastern 'Big Bang', EU enlargement entered a phase of greater fatigue and crises (e.g. the failed Constitutional Treaty, the UK withdrawal, the Eurozone and refugee crises, the COVID-19 pandemic), which slowed down the process and largely put into question the EU capabilities to further enlarge (Sekulić, 2020).[17] The 'enlargement fatigue' (EU incapability) within the European Union has brought about its concomitant malady within the Western Balkans in an 'accession fatigue' (candidates incapability) of reforms being either stalled or having gone into reverse in many countries and sectors (O'Brennan, 2014, p. 234). Studies show the stagnation of compliance with EU accession requirements and reverse democratisation trends over time in the region, albeit with different cross-country patterns (see Richter & Wunsch, 2020; Böhmelt & Freyburg, 2018).[18] In addition to the double-fatigue of incapability, an increasingly double-sided 'enlargement resistance' is becoming apparent, as the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans are becoming both unable and unwilling to make the necessary changes needed for membership (Economides, 2020).

Third, the process and the decisions on EU enlargement have two parallel facets: the technicalisation and the politicisation of the process. On the one hand, there are the immense administrative-technical aspects of the detailed assessment, by the European Commission, of the candidates' abilities to comply with the membership criteria (technicalisation). On the other hand, there are the political decisions by the member states in the European Council according to their preferences and national self-interests (politicisation). The core principles of the enlargement policy outlining the political, economic, and institutional aspects of EU accession were introduced in the first accession and developed further in 1993 with the Copenhagen criteria for membership.[19] The salience and relative weight of the political, economic, or institutional criteria in driving or inhibiting enlargement (Wallace, 2002) and their level of scrutiny (Kochenov, 2004) changes in importance between enlargement rounds. Moreover, the role of EU institutions, notably the Commission, *vis-à-vis* the member states has significantly increased since the first enlargement, which was more of a member-state-driven procedure. The subsequent enlargement rounds have adapted to the "classical Community method" focusing on the applicant's acceptance of the EU *acquis* and the negotiations of the transition periods (Preston, 1995). However, member states have recently reasserted their control and instrumentalised the newcomers' accession in their interests, disclosing a "creeping (re)nationalisation" of EU enlargement policy (Hillion, 2011, p.187). The previous eastern enlargement round had shown that there has been a constant switch between the incremental technical arrangements and political will, which has successfully facilitated enlargement deadlocks "by stealth", thus paving the way for membership without delays (Schneider, 2007; Dimitrova, 2020). However, such trade-offs have reached their limits and have worked in reverse in the case of the Western Balkans.

The politicisation of issues is constantly changing over time and among actors, making the countries of the Western Balkans more exposed to bilateral disputes or political agendas by the EU member states, therefore negatively impacting or, even worse, halting the process of EU enlargement.[20]

Fourth, the approach of a single vs. the group of countries is generating further tensions. Since the '90s, the EU's approach towards Eastern Europe has wavered between two contradictory options. On the one hand, there was the choice for a single policy framework open to all post-communist countries wishing to join; on the other hand, a more selective choice for differentiating among the individual partners and their timing of accession (Papadimitriou & Gateva 2009, p. 155). In 2000, the Zagreb Summit laid down the foundations of the EU Enlargement process in the Western Balkans, proposing "an individualised approach to each of these countries".[21] Unlike the previous *en block* enlargement rounds, EU membership in the Western Balkans would be handled according to the individual country's own merits and at their own pace. The initial 'regatta' approach based on individual performance (e.g. the case of Croatia), whereby each country would have to negotiate and join the EU at a different point in time, has shifted towards a 'waltz' approach with the Western Balkan countries getting closer to the EU in pairs (Bieber *et al.*, 2019, p. 7). A four-tier Western Balkans or 'multi-speed' waves of Southeastern Enlargement has emerged, with Croatia being the first among the group to succeed alone and become a member state in July 2013. Montenegro and Serbia, the closest countries to EU membership, are the next acceding 'couple', having negotiated membership since 2012 and 2014, respectively. North Macedonia and Albania are the next couple, being approved in June 2018 for accession negotiations, though with no date for starting to negotiate membership. The other two countries, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo have a long way to go, however, as they are not yet candidate countries (see Table 2).

Finally, the inherent dilemma of promoting stability or democracy is not something new either. Historical EU enlargements have embraced a 'stability through democracy' policy, portraying the EU as a normative and soft power where the accession of new members, especially from Southeast and Eastern Europe, has become synonymous with successful democratic transitions. In the case of the Western Balkans, this recurring stability-democracy tension had re-emerged with the former receiving more importance than democratic backsliding because of the imminent threat of regional instability due to a mix of internal and external factors (e.g. ethnic tensions, statehood issues, migration, and the growing influence of Russia and China) (Smith, Khaze & Kovacevic, 2021, p.180).[22] The EU conditionality policy in the Western Balkans is not credible and consistent, since the EU is facing a serious conflict of objectives, prioritising security interests (short- and mid-term stabilisation to avoid further escalation of conflicts) at the expense of long-term democratisation (democratic consolidation) (Richter, 2012). The conflicting EU objectives in the region are producing unintentional consequences. As a recent study (Richter & Wunsch, 2020) finds, the EU's conditionality has not triggered positive democratic performance, on the contrary, it has unintentionally undermined democratisation in the region (e.g. it has empowered informal clientelist networks, legitimised corrupt governments and elites, and weakened political competition and internal accountability). This has led to a regional *stabilitocracy,*[23] a step backward from the earlier vision of EU enlargement that emphasised liberal democracy over geopolitical considerations (Bieber, 2018, p.179).

CONCLUSION

The historical development of EU enlargement presents not only success stories, but also reluctance, awkwardness, and laggardness regarding full membership. Yet even in the cases of non-successful membership, either because of unwillingness or incapability, there has still been some degree of horizontal integration in certain sectoral policy areas. Overall, EU enlargement has been a complex, continuous multi-step interaction and multi-dimensional transformation process, involving different actors (the EU, the member states, and the applicants) with diverse logic of actions (rational or normative) that persist or change over time (depending on the interplay between the current conditions, the historical path, and the external factors), and thus determine the different degrees and the formal institutionalisation of horizontal integration (accession, association, or exclusion).

Historical enlargement rounds have unfolded in a similar trend, where each decade the EU has successfully accepted (multiples of) three new members. The exception here is the last incomplete round of the Southeastern enlargement, which is both a case of a continuous successful accession (Croatia), and of laggardness in the remaining countries of the Western Balkans – which are seeking to join a more integrated and expanded Union (timing) that has introduced various transition measures and mechanisms (temporality) substantially impacting their accession pace (tempo). The ongoing accession and association process has lasted for more than two decades, without any prospect of being concluded soon with successful new memberships. The factors driving Southeastern enlargement are like those of the previous rounds, albeit more nuanced regarding the geopolitical concern and material interest, and less identity-related. The EU engagement with the Western Balkans has turned into a 'convenient' relationship of long-term 'cohabitation with tensions', exhibiting the many dilemmas inherited from previous enlargement rounds, although amplified in the new context of growing uncertainties and unintended consequences. The process has become entrapped in the persistent (either real or perceived) EU enlargement tensions and trade-offs between deepening and widening, political and technical, fatigue and resistance, democratisation and stabilisation, individual and pair-wise accession.

How the EU (including its member states) and the candidate countries will manage to cope with the strains resulting from the EU enlargement dilemmas, and what trade-offs will have to be made, remains to be seen. Any viable solution, beyond the current *status quo* inhibiting accession, needs to consider this context and seek a balanced trade-off for reconciling the tensions.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Cohabitation: To describe here, the current status-quo state of institutional coexistence between the EU and the candidate countries of the Western Balkans. It is, in essence, a tense co-existence, with a very distant and unsure accession perspective.

Differentiated Integration: The EU institutional and legal framework does not extend equally to all member states.

Horizontal Integration: The geographical extension of the EU's acquis in different countries and policy areas.

Intergovernmentalism: The decision-making power, the direction and the speed of the integration process is determined by the consensual decisions—or unanimity, in the EU enlargement case—of the EU member-states.

Southeastern Europe (or Balkans): A cognitive space and historical region of Europe, often contested and with unclear borders. The core countries within this geographical space are Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Rumania, and Serbia.

Supranationalism: The decision-making power, the direction and the speed of the integration process is determined by the EU institutions and the independent officials appointed or elected by the member states.

Western Balkans: An analytical term for comparative analysis on European integration of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. It has been introduced in 1998 by the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union once Bulgaria and Romania were allowed to open EU membership talks.

ENDNOTES

[1] States that have started negotiations or concluded membership at similar times, are considered as part of the same Enlargement round, albeit they may form a different phase or wave of the same enlargement round.

[2] For example, Denmark opted out from the economic and monetary union, defence, and the area of freedom, security, and justice; Ireland opted out from the Schengen Agreement and the area of freedom, security, and justice; Poland opted out from the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (EUR-Lex Access to European Union Law).

[3] Although it has been argued that the EU enlargement policy has remained mostly unchanged with only minute modifications in response to specific demands of the applicants (Schimmelfennig, 2008; Lippert, 2021, p. 269), in the long-term, the inertia of the process prevails until any critical juncture or exogenous shock can bring institutional or policy change. For example, Avery (2009) argues that the adaptation of past enlargement procedures required large changes to past practice because of the historic challenge of the 'Big Bang' Eastern enlargement.

[4] On 18 April 1951, France, (West) Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg took the first steps towards unifying the continent by signing the Treaty of Paris setting up the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). On 25 March 1957, they signed the Treaty of Rome establishing the European Economic Community (EEC).

[5] Greece was the first new country willing to join the European Community. It submitted its formal application in June 1959, which led to the signing of the Association Agreement with the EEC in June 1961 (suspended in 1967 during the Junta *coup d'état* and military dictatorship). Spain's first formal request to join the European Community was in February 1962, but it was ignored because of Franco's dictatorial regime. Portugal requested to start the talks with the EEC in May 1970, but the accession talks were out of the question so long as the country was under the authoritarian regime of Salazar.

[6] The European Free Trade Association (EFTA) was established in 1960 by seven countries (Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) as an alternative trade bloc to EEC.

[7]   The pool of 12 applicants was larger and more geographically dispersed than it had been before, though some 'sub-groups' can be identified, for instance, the Mediterranean islands of Malta and Cyprus, the three Baltic States, the four Visegrad countries, and the two Southeastern countries of Bulgaria and Romania (Preston, 1995, p.456). The first five Eastern European countries to start accession negotiations, in March of 1998, were the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia, while Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and the Slovak Republic were invited to start accession negotiations in early 2000. Cyprus and Malta were invited to begin accession negotiations in 1997 and 1999, respectively.

[8]   For an extensive review on the political and scholarly debate about the (proposed) alternative forms for the EU-Turkey relationship outside the accession framework, see Tekin, 2021, pp. 162-164.

[9]   For the formal enlargement status in terms of the association, accession and membership of the countries from southeastern Europe, see Table 2.

[10]   The latest EU reports acknowledge the importance of enlargement not only for security within the region, but also for reducing the growing geopolitical interest of other actors in the region. "In times of increasing global challenges and divisions, [enlargement] remains more than ever a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong, and united Europe. A credible accession perspective is the key incentive and driver of transformation in the region and thus enhances our collective security and prosperity. It is a key tool to promote democracy, rule of law, and respect for fundamental rights, which are also the main engines of economic integration and the essential anchor for fostering regional reconciliation and stability. Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the EU's credibility, for the EU's success, and for the EU's influence in the region and beyond - especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition" (European Commission, 2020, p.1).

[11]   For recent data on trade, see Eurostat online data (Western Balkans-EU - international trade in goods statistics, 2020).

[12]   During 1991-1999, it is estimated that the EU and its member states contributed about 8.3 billion euro to the region (Uvalic, 2001, p.16).

[13]   "Spain spent 16 years at the Association Agreement stage before getting full membership in 1986, while Greece had a similar agreement for 20 years before becoming a full member. Even the EFTA countries, as a result of their 1972 Free Trade Agreement with the EC and their engagement in the Single European Market process through the EEA, had 20 years of tariff-free trade in industrial goods before moving to the next stage of integration." (Preston, 1995, p.459)

[14]   The time of accession negotiation, from the formal application for EU membership to accession treaty, was: 5 years during the first enlargement round (the UK, Ireland, and Denmark, without counting the time of suspended talks); 5 to 9 years in the Southern Enlargement round (Greece, and Portugal and Spain); 3 to 5 years for the EFTA countries (Finland, Austria and Sweeden); and over a decade for most of the countries of the Eastern enlargement (from 8 years to 13 years for Malta and Cyprus).

[15]   Kelemen, Menon & Slapin (2014) argue that enlargement could create potential short-term gridlock but in the long run it facilitates deepening. Its impact on deepening is highly dependent on the preferences of the new members and the nature of decision-making rules.

[16]   For a more detailed account of the historical symptoms of EU enlargement fatigue, see Szołucha, 2010.

17 For example, the Directorate General for Enlargement was integrated with that for Neighbourhood Policy; the announcement by the President of the European Commission in 2014 that there will be no enlargement of the European Union during his mandate (2014-2019).

18 Only North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro perform well and are likely to be ready during the mid-2030s, whereas Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo may face even greater problems in their ability to incorporate the EU *acquis* before 2050. (Reference to the EU compliance performance data from Richter & Wunsch, 2020; Böhmelt & Freyburg, 2018)

19 In 1961 the Political Affairs Committee of the European Parliament started the first general debate on the principles of Enlargement based on a draft report prepared by the German MEP Willy Birkelbach, which outlined the political, economic, and institutional aspects of accession or association with the Community. The Declaration on European Identity (1973), the Community's Joint Declaration on Fundamental Rights (1977), and the Declaration on Democracy (1978) were all commitments to fundamental democratic values to which acceding states would have to abide (the principles of representative democracy, the rule of law, social justice and respect for human rights), which later on would lead to the formal constitutionalisation of democratic values as part of the 'Copenhagen criteria' for membership (Thomas, 2006, p.1206-1207; De Angelis & Karamouzi, 2016, p.442-457).

20 For example, the European Council, based on a veto first by France and then by Bulgaria, have refused to start negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania despite the positive opinion by the Commission. The additional pre-accession requirement to resolve 'open issues' between an existing EU member state and a candidate country challenges the EU accession process considerably (in the worst case blocking accession), as the member states are less motivated and may potentially impose unreasonable demands even when the candidate country is willing to make significant concessions (Petrovic & Wilson, 2021, p. 213). Moreover, the new enlargement methodology and its strategic documents (see e.g. European Commission 2020) acknowledge the ever growing non-technical nature of the accession negotiations with an upfront political engagement from the member states (Petrovic & Tzifakis, 2021, p. 162).

21 See the Final Declaration of the Zagreb Summit, 24 November 2000: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/er/Declang4.doc.html

22 For a more detailed analysis of the stability-democracy dilemma in the EU's Western Balkan engagement since the 1990s, see Smith, Khaze & Kovacevic (2021), who argue that there is a tension rather than a dilemma between the two. Although not a clear stability-democracy dilemma, a tension between the two exists and has led to an increasingly ineffective strategy (despite significant investment), particularly with regards to the EU's democracy promotion efforts.

23 A concept also used by other scholars to describe the semi-authoritarian regimes with persistent shortcomings in terms of democratic governance and practices that enjoy external support and legitimacy, particularly from EU member states, for the sake of offering some supposed stability.