

Whether the current time of wars and conflicts between the great powers will help the EU to finally realize that the most important issues are geography, territory and its defense, remains to be seen.

Policy priorities in flux: EU enlargement in a continental polycrisis

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This paper starts from the premise of several existing and medium- to long-term crises on the European continent (polycrisis), that are from the EU's point of view both internal (overdue institutional changes, cascading economic shocks, the advent of new right politics) and external (Russian war on Ukraine, USA's anti-EU overtures, USA and Israel attack on Iran, global economic competition), and argues that the EU enlargement policy has no firm anchoring in Brussels. The author will use the existing literature to elaborate the effects of the polycrisis on the EU's public debate on the enlargement process, having in mind both the EU level and selected member states' level. For this the author will consult public statements, policy documents, polling data on the EU enlargement, and the wider policy debates, using the concept of strategic narratives. The author will then analyse the interlocking effects of the new territorial reality of enlargement in Eastern Europe - on Ukraine and Moldova - on the Balkan area and Balkan states' prospects. The discussion will show a two-tier approach by the EU: proactive in the domain of the EU Commission's enlargement portfolio and restrained at the European Council level where polycrisis erodes the perceived usefulness of the enlargement process. The author will conclude that the EU does not view the enlargement process as a strategic priority nor a necessity, and that any success of the candidate states in the process will be weighed not on their merit but on the EU's ability to project the enlargement as a part of the solution(s) to the ongoing polycrisis.

When the wind of change switches its direction: The EU enlargement in the Western Balkans

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For almost two decades, from 1989 onward, enlargement was the flagship of the European Union and considered one of its most successful policies. The Big Bang enlargement in 2004/2007, and Croatia's entry in 2013, were meant to mark the beginning of the complete political unification of the entire European continent. It, however, marked the beginning of the longest period of non-enlargement in the EU's history. Within two decades, the enlargement enthusiasm in the European Union, its institutions, member states and among its citizens, was replaced by enlargement scepticism. This scepticism was mainly triggered by economic and regional disparities, political tensions on EU and national levels, perceptions of disempowerment and identity loss within the EU, but directly caused a growing resentment towards new potential members as well. While these are all micro-level consequences, this paper aims to compare the macro-level conditions of enlargement for countries that joined in 2004/2007, on the one hand, and the Western Balkan countries, on the other. To this end it will look at 1) the commitment for enlargement among the political elites in both the EU and the candidate countries through the lens of the respective *Zeitgeist* ("united Europe" vs "Europe of two classes"); consider 2) the existence vs the lack of strong economic interests as a mutual incentive for successful integration; and analyse how 3) the polycrisis starting in 2009 and reaching its peak in 2022, was historically fundamentally different from the period 1989-2007 and how the single crisis impacted both the EU and the Western Balkans in their positioning towards enlargement.