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9 December 2010

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/28075/>

MPRA Paper No. 28075, posted 18 Jan 2011 07:56 UTC

Has Enlargement Been, and Will It Continue to Be, a Success?

An Evaluation of EU Enlargement's Effects on Policies Pursued by Candidate Countries

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss whether enlargement has been a successful external policy of the European Union (EU). In particular, I evaluate the policy's success based on its effects on the policies candidate countries have pursued. I argue that the prospect of entering the European Union has promoted beneficial democratic, economic and social reforms in candidate countries, and therefore can be judged to have been a success.

I focus on two sets of enlargement rounds where the potential for the EU's influence on candidate countries' policies was greatest: the 1980s rounds, during which Spain, Portugal and Greece – three countries with then-recent histories of dictatorship – were admitted; and the 2004/2007 rounds, during which twelve new Member States acceded, mostly from the post-communist Central and Eastern Europe.

I conclude that enlargement has, indeed, been a success: The prospect of entering the European Union (EU) has prompted candidate countries to pursue political, economic and social reforms that have contributed to the consolidation of democracy, to improvements in their human rights records, as well as to the betterment of their market economies. Finally, I discuss whether the enlargement process is likely to continue to be successful in improving the candidate countries' policies, both in the Western Balkans (the likely next focus of EU enlargement), but also in potential further expansions.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss whether enlargement has been a successful external policy of the European Union (EU). In particular, I evaluate the policy's success based on its effects on the policies candidate countries have pursued.² I argue that the prospect of entering the European Union has promoted beneficial democratic, economic and social reforms in candidate countries, and therefore can be judged to have been a success.

My argument proceeds as follows: First, I provide a brief overview of the European Union's enlargement history. Then, I consider the effects that the prospect of entering the European Union has had on the political, economic and social reforms in candidate countries. I focus, in particular, on two sets of enlargement rounds where the potential for the EU's influence on candidate countries' policies was greatest: the 1980s rounds, during which Spain, Portugal and Greece – three countries with then-recent histories of dictatorship – were admitted; and the 2004/2007 rounds, during which twelve new Member States acceded, mostly from the post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. I conclude that enlargement has, indeed, been a success: The prospect of entering the European Union (EU) has prompted candidate countries to pursue political, economic and social reforms that have contributed to the consolidation of democracy, to improvements in their human rights records, as well as to the betterment of their market economies.

Finally, I discuss whether the enlargement process is likely to continue to be successful in improving the candidate countries' policies, both in the Western Balkans (the likely next focus of EU enlargement), but also in potential further expansions. I highlight some challenges that the

² This is, of course, not the sole criterion that one can use to judge whether EU enlargement has been, on the whole, a success or a failure. Alternative criteria might include the enlargement effects on the European Union's economic performance, on its capacity for institutional decision-making, or on its relative influence on the world diplomatic stage. While these are all legitimate angles from which to approach the question, they go beyond the scope of this paper

European Union's enlargement is likely to encounter in the future: One prominent challenge is the lack of political will to expand the Union beyond the Western Balkans, which would reduce the EU's ability to use its accession requirements to influence candidate states' policy decisions. Another major challenge involves the potential for backsliding from achieved political, economic and social reforms among new Member States, once pre-accession conditionality loses its power to constrain their governments' actions.

ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The European Union has gone through several rounds of enlargement – the admission of new Member States – since its beginnings in the 1950s as the six-nation European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), composed of France, West Germany, Italy and the three Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg).³ The first enlargement round focused on relatively prosperous and democratic countries in Western Europe: In 1973, the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland joined the Union. The second and third enlargement rounds, sometimes referred to as the 'Mediterranean' rounds, took in three countries in southern Europe that had recently been ruled by autocratic regimes: Greece entered the EU in 1982, and was followed by Spain and Portugal in 1986. The end of the Cold War and the consequent relaxation of geopolitical tensions allowed Austria, Finland and Sweden, three democratic and economically advanced countries that had remained neutral, to enter the European Union.⁴ The fifth enlargement round, completed in 2004, was the largest one of all: The Union admitted as many as ten new Member States – predominantly formerly communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2007, these were

³ To achieve greater simplicity in exposition, I will refer to the European Union's predecessor institutions (such as the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Community) simply as 'the European Union' throughout the essay. This approach is common in academic literature.

⁴ Austria, Finland and Sweden have, for instance, never joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

followed by Romania and Bulgaria, two post-communist countries that had not met the accession criteria in 2004.

Currently, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland and Turkey are officially recognized as candidate countries for full EU membership, and all the other Western Balkan countries⁵ are “potential candidate countries,” since “the EU has repeatedly reaffirmed at the highest level its commitment for the European perspective of the Western Balkans.”⁶ There has, furthermore, been some speculation about eventual EU membership for countries such as Ukraine, Georgia or even Tunisia, but these are – for reasons of insufficient preparedness, as well as due to sensitive geopolitical considerations – not likely to be on the enlargement agenda in the near future.⁷

As we have seen, some enlargement rounds have involved the accession of candidate countries that had already built up robust democratic institutions, and had developed well-functioning market economies. It is reasonable to expect that, for these candidates, the prospect of entering the EU was unlikely to have been a major incentive for political or economic reform, since very little of it was needed. In other enlargement rounds, however, the candidate countries had just thrown off the shackles of authoritarian regimes, and – especially in the case of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe – may also have been embarking on a complicated process of transformation from centrally-planned to market-based economies. Such enlargement rounds – in particular, the 1982/1986 waves (Greece, Spain and Portugal) and the 2004/2007 waves (mostly post-communist Europe) – can provide better clues about the enlargement’s effect on the candidate countries’ policies, and will be therefore be the primary focus of this paper.

⁵ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.

⁶ European Commission (2010).

⁷ See, for instance, Shumylo (2006), or Leonard and Grant (2005).

THE 1982 AND 1986 ACCESSION ROUNDS: GREECE, SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

The 1982 and 1986 enlargement rounds of the EU saw the accession of Greece, Spain and Portugal – three countries with relatively recent histories of autocratic rule. Between 1967 and 1974, Greece was ruled by a military junta.⁸ In Spain, Francisco Franco had been the military dictator since the civil war of the late 1930s until his death in 1975. Franco's rule was characterized by numerous violations of human rights, and by the often brutal persecution of political opponents.⁹ Portugal, similarly, had been governed by an authoritarian right-wing regime between 1933 and the Carnation Revolution of 1974, led – for a majority of this time period – by António Salazar.¹⁰ By the end of the 1970s, all three countries had rid themselves of their autocratic rulers, and begun a process of democratization.

These so-called Mediterranean enlargement rounds marked the EU's first significant activities in the sphere of democracy promotion: Individual governments of EU Member States, as well as the European Union as a whole, have “provid[ed] support to democratic politicians, [...] forg[ed] links with political parties, advanc[ed] important economic and political incentives, [...] grant[ed] external guarantees to business and propertied classes who might have been worried about the consequences of democratization.”¹¹ The European Union also successfully leveraged the Greek, Portuguese and Spanish desire to “lose the feeling of isolation” that they had experienced during their years of autocratic rule, and capitalized on their related “desire to prove that they were fully European.”¹² Together with judicious actions on the part of domestic political leaders, such as the careful transition leadership by King Juan Carlos and Prime

⁸ Cassis (2008)

⁹ Linz (2000)

¹⁰ Raby (1991)

¹¹ Kubicek (2003)

¹² Díez-Nicolás (2003)

Minsiter Adolfo Suárez in Spain,¹³ the prospect of joining the European Union has thus contributed to the democratization of Europe's formerly autocratic south.

THE 2004 AND 2007 ACCESSION ROUNDS: CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Ten new Member States joined the European Union in 2004: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. In 2007, they were followed by Romania and Bulgaria. With the exception of Cyprus and Malta, all of the new Member States had been part of the communist bloc during the Cold War, and had just completed an often painful, but necessary transition from centrally-planned to market-based economies.

Already at the very beginning of 1990s, many Central and Eastern European countries had openly spoken of their ambition to join the EU as part of their "return to Europe."¹⁴ It was not until 1993, however, that the European Union gave them a clear prospect of EU membership with the announcement of the Copenhagen criteria:¹⁵ The concluding declaration from the 1993 Copenhagen European summit states that "membership requires that the candidates country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy, as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union."¹⁶ In addition, the candidate must possess "[the] ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union."¹⁷ The European Union's requirement that candidate countries can only become Member States if they comply with a set

¹³ Encarnación (2001)

¹⁴ Sedelmeier (2010).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ European Parliament (2003).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

of political, economic and social requirements is often referred to as “conditionality,” and was a major source of the EU’s influence on the policies and reforms undertaken in candidate countries.¹⁸

On the whole, conditionality is seen to have been rather successful in bringing about reforms in Central and Eastern European candidate countries. While political conditionality may have been “redundant in the forerunner countries of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe [...] and generally ineffective with entrenched authoritarian regimes, it proved highly effective in supporting democratic forces [...] in the unstable democratic countries of the region.”¹⁹ Conditionality has also helped candidate countries commit to various political, economic and social reforms that have strengthened the states’ administrative capacity,²⁰ enabled them to isolate various populist and nationalist forces,²¹ and improved their protections for ethnic minorities.²²

For a subset of the candidate countries, the prospect of joining the common currency had an additional positive impact on economic governance. Three of the newly admitted members, Slovakia, Slovenia and Estonia, have been able to meet the Maastricht convergence criteria, based on Article 121 of the European Community Treaty,²³ for the adoption of the single currency (the euro): They have successfully kept their inflation rates, long-term interest rates, government deficits, as well as their debt as a proportion of gross domestic product within the required bands, and have – as a result – already joined the euro zone (Slovakia and Slovenia), or are scheduled to do so at the beginning of 2011 (Estonia).²⁴

¹⁸ Sedelmeier (2010).

¹⁹ Schimmelfennig (2007)

²⁰ Dimitrova (2002)

²¹ Pop-Eleches (2007), Vachudova (2005)

²² Kelley (2007)

²³ Lipinska (2008)

²⁴ Schaefer (2010)

THE PROMISE AND PITFALLS OF FURTHER ENLARGEMENT

WESTERN BALKANS: There appears to be a strong consensus among policy-makers that countries in the Western Balkans are headed for eventual EU membership. In a declaration adopted at the 2003 EU-Western Balkans summit in the Thessaloniki, a city in northern Greece, the EU has “reiterate[d] its unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries,” and stated clearly that “[t]he future of the Balkans is within the European Union.”²⁵

The Stabilisation and Association Process, a negotiation procedure launched by the European Union for the Western Balkan countries in 1999, has laid out a basic framework for the region’s EU membership talks. As part of the negotiation process, it has required candidates from the Western Balkans to fully cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), as well as to pursue regional reconciliation.²⁶ So far, the record of this sort of EU conditionality has been mixed, largely due to the politically and emotionally sensitive nature of war crimes trials: While Croatia and the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina have, despite initial misgivings, collaborated with the International Criminal Tribunal, much more cooperation is desired from the Republika Srpska (a Serbian-majority part of the Bosnian state) and Serbia.²⁷ All in all, however, public opinion polls point to strong support for EU membership among the voters in the region. As a result of the popular demand for European integration, EU’s conditionality requirements are likely to have a significant effect on the policies of Western European nations.²⁸

²⁵ European Union (2003)

²⁶ Dimitrijevic et al. (2009)

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

BEYOND THE WESTERN BALKANS: Whether the ‘pull’ of the European Union can stimulate political, economic and social reform beyond the Western Balkans region is, however, much more questionable: Compared to the previous enlargement rounds, there appears to be less willingness among the EU’s political class to commit to the Union’s further expansion. The prospect of EU membership negotiations with countries such as Ukraine or Georgia, furthermore, raises geopolitical concerns, as Russia is said to regard these countries as part of its ‘backyard.’²⁹

Turkey, in particular, presents an important challenge. It has been an official candidate for full EU membership since the Helsinki summit of 1999, and has, partly to meet the EU’s prerequisites for admission, made great progress in consolidating its democratic institutions, improving its human rights record, and integrating its economy with the European Union.³⁰

At the same time, however, European leaders disagree about whether Turkey should be allowed to join. On the one hand, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, has spoken out in favor of Turkish membership, even calling it “vital for our economy, vital for our security, and vital for our diplomacy.”³¹ On the other hand, however, Nicholas Sarkozy, the French President, has stated that Turkey does not belong in Europe, because – among other arguments – “it is in Asia minor.”³² The conservative German Chancellor Angela Merkel has repeatedly stated that “Turkey [was] not suitable for EU membership,”³³ contradicting her more liberal foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, who has consistently favored Turkish membership.³⁴

²⁹ Shumylo (2006), Leonard and Grant (2005)

³⁰ Schimmelfennig et al. (2003).

³¹ BBC News (2010a)

³² AFP (2007)

³³ BBC News (2010b)

³⁴ Today’s Zaman (2010)

Arguments against Turkey's membership are quite varied, and range from concerns about the political weight of post-accession Turkey, a populous country whose rates of population growth far exceed the European average,³⁵ through concerns about the country's commitment to democratic values and human rights,³⁶ all the way to misgivings about the country's predominant culture, and about the perceived risks of admitting a large Muslim-majority country into the EU.³⁷ As a result of mixed signals from European leaders, Turkish public opinion has turned against EU membership.³⁸ There is, furthermore, growing concern that Turkey may turn away from the European Union, assert itself more fully on the international stage, and perhaps even backslide from the political and economic reforms it has already completed.³⁹

CONCERN ABOUT BACKSLIDING: In addition to questions about the continued effectiveness of its conditionality policies, the European Union should be concerned about the potential for backsliding from good governance among newly admitted members: Once the pre-accession conditionality requirements do not constrain the political leaders of new Member States, they may have less of an incentive to maintain the results of political and economic reforms that have been achieved in the enlargement process.⁴⁰

In a recently published study, political scientists Grigore Pop-Eleches and Phillip Levitz use a combination of cross-national statistics, expert interviews and public opinion data to examine whether there was backsliding from political and economic reforms in the new Member States – ones which entered the EU in the 2004 enlargement round: They argue that there has

³⁵ Bunse (2010)

³⁶ Sedelmeier (2010)

³⁷ Aznar (2010)

³⁸ Sedelmeier (2010).

³⁹ BBC News (2010a), Today's Zaman (2010)

⁴⁰ Levitz and Pop-Eleches (2010)

been, at most, a slowdown in reform, but find no evidence of a genuine, large-scale backlash. They attribute this outcome to “the fact that the loss of leverage after the countries joined the EU was balanced by a combination of alternative leverage and linkage mechanisms, including greater dependence on EU aid and trade, and greater exposure to the West for both elites and ordinary citizens.”⁴¹

Over the last couple of years, however, anecdotal evidence has been mounting that some backsliding from good governance may, indeed, be occurring: The new Hungarian government led by Viktor Orbán, a center-right politician with some nationalistic tendencies,⁴² has, for instance, recently passed a new media law that increased government oversight of public and private broadcasters, and has also been accused of extensive cronyism. “Outsiders are worried about Hungary,” writes the Economist, an influential British newspaper, “[Orbán] has started replacing the leaders of public institutions and agencies with his party pals.” In 2008, Slovakia passed a press law that guarantees “the right to reply” – a requirement that newspapers print replies from any and all individuals who feel their reputation has suffered as a result of a published article. The press law has been criticized as a possible infringement of the freedom of speech.⁴³

Finally, the European Commission has recently criticized Bulgaria and Romania for high levels of corruption,⁴⁴ and went so far as to freeze a significant amount of structural fund and agricultural aid payments to both countries as a result.⁴⁵ Eli Gateva, a political scientist at the University of Manchester, has argued that “the establishment of a Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for monitoring Bulgaria’s and Romania’s progress in the areas of judiciary [reform]

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Hungarian Spectrum (2010)

⁴³ Mikulová (2008)

⁴⁴ Lobjakas (2008)

⁴⁵ Euractiv (2008)

and [the] fight against corruption [...] confirms the evolutionary nature [and] introduces a new feature, that of post-accession conditionality.”⁴⁶

CONCLUSION: THE (FUTURE?) SUCCESS OF ENLARGEMENT

In this essay, I have examined evidence from European Union enlargement rounds that have involved countries with histories of authoritarian rule and, in the case of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, of central planning. My examination suggests that the prospect of EU accession can have powerful effects on the policies and reforms pursued by candidate countries: EU enlargement has served to consolidate democratic governance, and to stimulate beneficial economic and social reforms.

Given the almost universal commitment on the part of the EU’s political leadership to bringing the Western Balkans into the Union, the prospect of EU membership is likely to continue to be a significant positive influence on policies in countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Croatia. It is less clear, however, whether enlargement can retain its strong effects on candidate countries beyond the Western Balkans (such as Turkey, but potentially also Ukraine or Georgia), whose membership in the EU may not enjoy equally broad support among Europe’s politicians, or may even raise serious geopolitical concerns.

An additional concern is the possibility of backsliding in the new members: Although some academic studies have found surprisingly little backlash against pre-accession reforms, some recent events – from new Member States such as Hungary, Slovakia, Romania or Bulgaria – should raise serious concerns, and make EU leaders consider the use of “post-accession conditionality,”⁴⁷ such as the withdrawal of aid payments from non-compliant countries.

⁴⁶ Gateva (2010)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

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