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Can the European Public Block the Enlargement to the Western Balkans?

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The EU enlargement has been questioned since the first enlargement round. Also, since the start of the global economic crisis, public support to further enlargement decreased significantly.

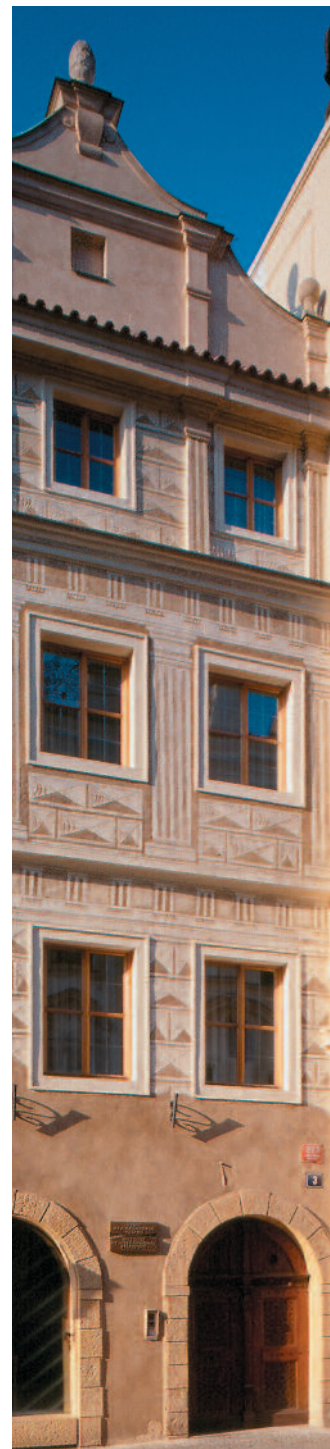
Whether a turnaround in this trend will occur depends on whether there will be changes in several main dimensions.

The EU and its member states, as well as the candidate and potential candidate states, need to improve their economic performances and provide opportunities and perspective to their younger generations.

The political and economic performance of the newest member states, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, is a significant indicator that can shape the public opinion on further enlargement.

The candidate and potential candidate states should be further encouraged and supported in their fulfilling of the accession criteria.

The EU institutions and national governments should develop policies to explain to citizens the implications of further enlargement.



Introduction

Although the European perspective was granted to the Western Balkan states during the European Council summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, the majority of European citizens, according to the Eurobarometer opinion poll, did not support further EU enlargement in 2013.¹ This was a significant decline compared to the findings of the same poll in 2006.²

European enlargement is considered to be the most successful foreign policy tool of the EU. The argument is that EU enlargement brings respect for human rights and better living standards to new member states, and peace and stability to Europe as such. However, in response to the change in the basic European constellations the newly elected President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker declared on 15 July 2014 in

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his Political Guidelines for the next European Commission that “[t]he EU needs to take a break from enlargement so that we can consolidate what has been achieved among the 28. This is

why, under my Presidency of the Commission, ongoing negotiations will continue, and notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place over the next five years.”³

As the next section will show, the new policy of the Commission corresponds with the change in the EU public opinion. However, from a pro-enlargement position we cautiously ask, “Is there a danger that the ‘pressure’ of public opinion will help to postpone further enlargement for much longer than ‘only’ a five year period, or even block it forever?”

This paper will analyse this question with respect to the lessons learned from the recent EU internal development and external-enlargement policy. It will also pay attention to the situation in the Visegrád Group countries, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, which have historically been more supportive of enlargement than the “old” EU member states. Finally, the paper will articulate some policy suggestions and recommendations for the actors who would like to move the enlargement agenda further, despite the recent difficulties and obstacles.

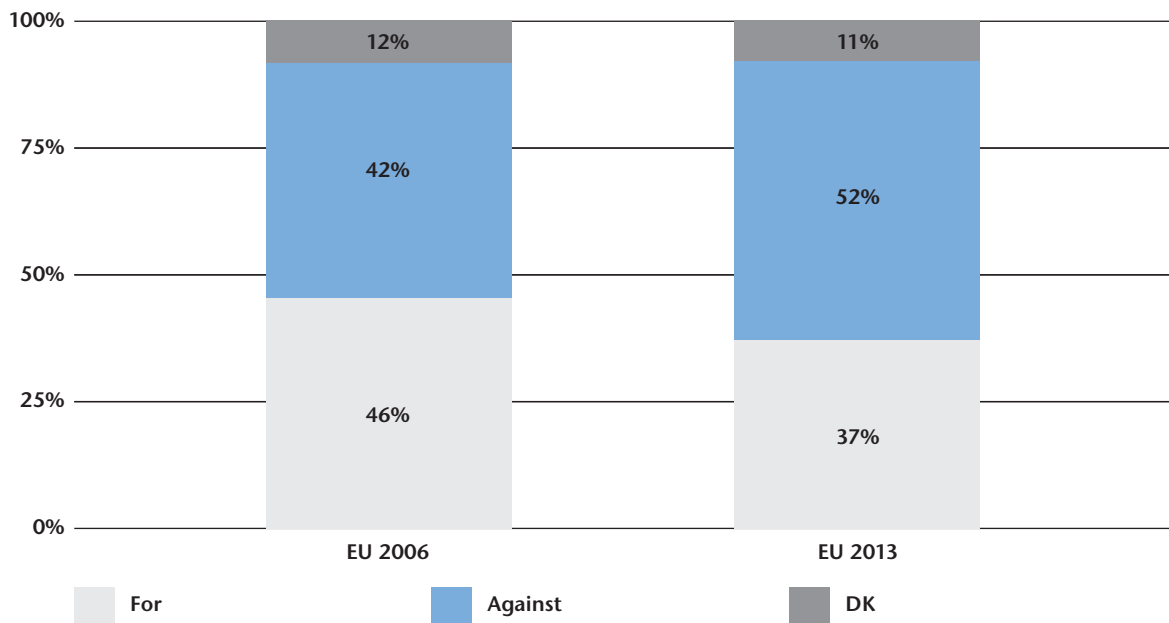
¹ European Commission, Eurobarometer 80, 2013.

² European Commission, Eurobarometer 66, 2006.

³ Juncker, Jean-Claude: A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change – Political Guidelines for the next European Commission.

Public opinion in the EU and the Visegrád Group countries

In 2006, two years after the biggest EU enlargement round ever, 46 percent of the EU public supported further enlargement, while 42 percent was against it.⁴ However, the situation changed significantly seven years later. According to the Standard Eurobarometer 80, in 2013 only 37 percent of EU citizens supported the accession of new member states in the following years, and 52 percent were against it.⁵ The following graph shows the development in the EU:



Graphic 1: Percentages of EU citizens who were for and against enlargement in the EU in 2006 and 2013. Sources: Standard Eurobarometer 66 and 80.

The situation in the Visegrad Group countries is somewhat specific. All the V4 countries are vocal supporters of further EU enlargement, which is apparent when we glimpse over the recent foreign policies of these states. For instance, the visa liberalization for the Western Balkan countries and EU enlargement were both considered priorities during the Czech EU Presidency in 2009. During the same period, Albania applied for membership, and the “Czech Presidency also made sure that the application of Montenegro was brought before the Commission for assessment.”⁶ Also the Hungarian government declared enlargement as one of its four goals during its EU Presidency in the first half of 2011, pointing out that “the enlargement of the EU brings stability, peace and cohesion to ever greater parts of the continent. The Presidency will be devoted to maintain[ing] the openness of the European Union”.⁷ During the Polish EU Presidency in the

⁴ European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 66, 2006.

⁵ European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 80, 2013.

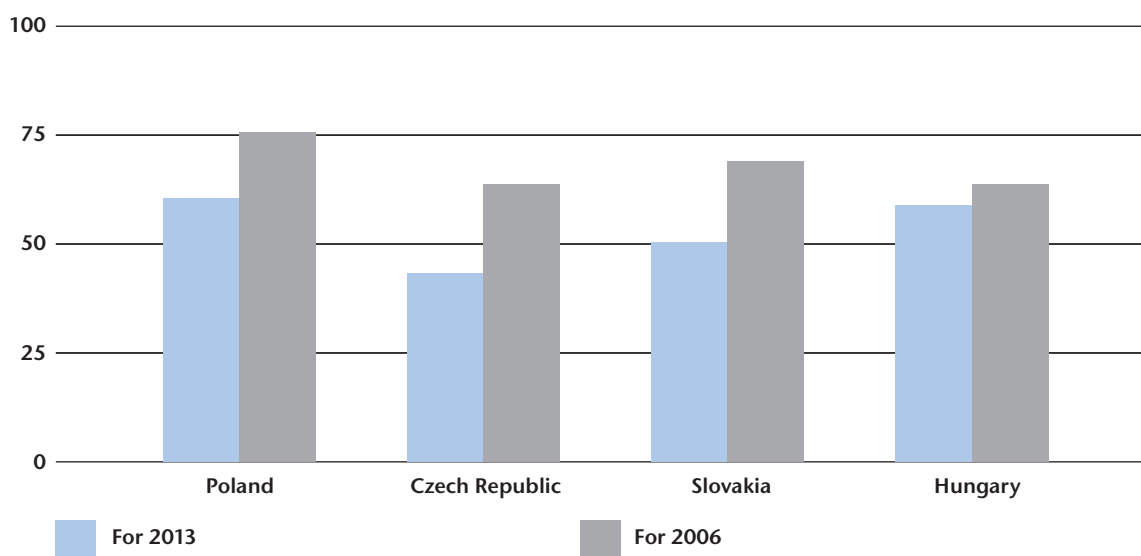
⁶ Achievements of the Czech Presidency, 2009: 7.

⁷ The Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2011: 14.

second half of 2011, an “Open Europe”, including enlargement, has been one of the three priorities of the Polish government. Slovakia also has close ties to the Western Balkans, which is epitomized in the fact that the current Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, Miroslav Lajčák, a former High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, still maintains a strong interest in this region.

Thus, the V4 countries seem to have played an important role in the process of advocating further EU enlargement after they became EU members in 2004. They also stand out as examples of, generally taken, a successful and even surprisingly smooth integration of post-communist countries into the EU. The Visegrad Group states have made huge steps in transforming their political systems into democratic ones and integrating their economies with the EU market. Moreover, their levels of economic performance and social stability seem to be satisfactory in the context of an EU-wide comparison of the member states. For instance, Poland was the only country in the EU with a constant economic growth during the global economic crisis. Also, just before the economic crisis Slovakia was the country with the highest percentage of economic growth in the EU, and the Czech Republic remains a country with one of the lowest unemployment rates in the EU.⁸

Because of their similar historical experiences with a one-party political system and a centrally planned economy, the Visegrad Group countries can, arguably, better understand the transformation process in the Western Balkan states. This could play a very important and positive role in any further process of EU enlargement. However, the V4 countries were also among the states where public support for further enlargement has decreased between 2006 and 2013. The following graph shows that there was a strong decrease of support for it in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland during this period, while the support in Hungary decreased only by 5 percent.



Graphic 2: Support for enlargement in the VISEGRÁD GROUP countries in 2006 and 2013. Sources: Standard Eurobarometer 66 and 80.

⁸ Eurostat database.

The graph shows that the majority of citizens in Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary still support further enlargement. Nevertheless, the recent decline in public support in these countries should be taken seriously. The V4 countries seem to have been very important in the prioritizing of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, or at least in keeping this idea alive in the EU institutions. The pro-enlargement position of these countries is not set in stone, though; and with the decreasing public support for further enlargement, we can expect this position to weaken in the forthcoming months and years. The politicians in these states simply can not afford to pursue long-term policies that would go against the wishes of their voters. Sooner or later we can also expect the hitherto disinterested media to pick up on this issue in the V4 countries. What can we do if we wish to effectively pursue the enlargement agenda, despite the recent odds?

Why has the support decreased?

In order to find out what to do to save the enlargement agenda, it might be useful to briefly analyse the likely causes of the decrease in support for further enlargement. There has been much public debate on enlargement fatigue recently, although the debates about the accession of new member states are not new.⁹ Nevertheless, since 2004 13 new countries acceded to the Union, which now consists of 28 states. In this period, questions have been continuously raised about whether the new members were ready for accession, about whether the EU was ready for them, and even about whether it was necessary or appropriate

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that the new states accede.¹⁰ However, the “problematic” enlargement round in 2004 seems to have been forgotten by the EU public recently, mainly because there has been no overwhelming immigration of citizens and labourers from newer (and poorer) member states to older (and wealthier) member states. The overall locus of public debates in the EU member states has shifted towards concerns over the future of the Eurozone, the European performance of the states which acceded in 2007 and 2013, and also the preparedness of the candidate and potential candidate states.

The problematic performance of the three newest member states, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, which entered the EU in 2007 and 2013, is certainly a specific factor influ-

⁹ Verney, S.: *Justifying the Second Enlargement: Promoting Interests, Consolidating Democracy, or Returning to the Roots? Questioning EU Enlargement: Europe in Search of Identity*, pp. 19–42. London–New York: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁰ Ágh, Atilla: *Eastern Enlargement and the Future of the EU27: EU Foreign Policy in a Global World*. Budapest: Research Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2006.

encing the opinions of the EU citizens on further enlargement. In other words, the better the new members of the Union implement reforms and present their ability to transform into well-functioning states, the more likely are citizens to support such state as members of the EU and also further enlargement. In this respect, it must be said that the three newest member states were, by far, not as ready for accession as the states which entered the EU in 2004. In Bulgaria and Romania the performances of some institutions and authorities have been widely questioned, especially with respect to rule of law and institutional transparency. Croatia, on the other hand, is often likened to Greece with respect to its economic performance and macroeconomic stability.

At the same time, it must be noted that the candidate and potential candidate Western Balkan states have not transformed yet into fully democratic states and there is still a need for economic reforms in them. Their economies perform poorly, their unemployment rates are high and they lack inward investment. Thus, similarly to the cases of the newest member states, the poor performance of the candidate and potential candidate states surely brings forth a negative effect in terms of the support for further enlargement among the EU citizens.

However, while analysing the decrease in support for further enlargement, it should be taken into account that European citizens, in fact, know and care much more about their domestic political situations than about the EU as such.¹¹ A manifestation of this is the low turnout in the recent European elections, especially in the Visegrád Group countries.¹² The theory of “second order elections” explains that voters view the European elections as less important compared to the national ones, and therefore the turnout in

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the former is lower.¹³ In a similar vein, Hix and Follesdal argue that the European Parliament is “too distant” from voters, and citizens do not understand the EU much because “the EU is too different

from domestic democratic institutions”.¹⁴ In light of these considerations we may argue that European citizens do not reach their opinions on further enlargement based only on a thorough rational evaluation of the pros and cons of enlargement. On the contrary, when answering this question they, more often than not, base their answers on their respective individual experiences and feelings, while at the same time they do not completely understand the likely consequences of enlargement for them or for the EU.

¹¹ Hobolt, Sara Binzer: “Taking Cues on Europe? Voter Competence and Party Endorsements in Referendums on European Integration”. *European Journal of Political Research* 46.2 (2007): 151–182. Print.

¹² European elections website, available at <http://www.results-elections2014.eu/en/election-results-2014.html>.

¹³ Reif, Karlheinz–Schmitt, Hermann: “Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework For the Analysis of European Election Results”. *European Journal of Political Research* 8, No. 1 (1980): 3–44.

¹⁴ Follesdal, Andreas–Simon Hix, Simon: “Why There is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik”. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 44, No. 3 (2006): 533–562.

In this respect it is important to take into account that according to Eurobarometer, economic issues are the biggest concern of Europeans, especially unemployment and the national economic situation.¹⁵ Correspondingly, the debates about enlargement and the EU's ability to fight the crisis have intensified after the global financial and economic crisis started. The effects of the crisis have strengthened the perception of citizens that the EU is not capable of solving European problems, which was largely discussed in the media, with a big impact on public opinion.¹⁶ One of the likely effects of the crisis is the overall decrease in support for further enlargement, which we currently experience. In other words, also thanks to the crisis the majority of EU citizens think that things are going "in the wrong direction" in the EU,¹⁷ and therefore it should not be enlarged in the near future. The enlargement fatigue had been present in the European politics well before the economic crisis started. However, the crisis has, arguably, added a new element to it by amplifying the previously held uncertainties.

To sum up, this section argues that the problematic performance of the newest member states and the candidate and potential candidate countries is one of the major causes of the decrease in support for further EU enlargement, which is further enhanced by the effects of the global economic crisis, and the overall anxiety that things are going in the wrong direction in the EU.

Conclusions and recommendations

Questioning of the EU enlargement is nothing new. Since the first enlargement round, the accession of the new member states has been debated. However, when the economic crisis started, these debates have intensified because the crisis has reinforced the old uncertainties, and maybe even added some new ones. From a pro-enlargement perspective, whether a turnaround in this trend will occur depends on whether there will be changes in several main dimensions.

First, the EU and its member states, as well as the candidate and potential candidate states, need to improve their economic performances and provide opportunities and perspective to their younger generations. This can be achieved not only by widening and deepening the common market, but also by common investments, education projects, and the development of a common infrastructure.

¹⁵ European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 80, 2013.

¹⁶ Maier, J.–Rittberger, B: "Shifting Europe's Boundaries: Mass Media, Public Opinion and the Enlargement of the EU". *European Union Politics* 9, No. 2 (2008): 243–267.

¹⁷ European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 80, 2013.

Secondly, the newest member states, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, need to perform better in the near future. Their political and economic performance is a significant indicator that can shape the opinions on further enlargement.

Thirdly, the candidate and potential candidate states should be further encouraged and supported in their fulfilling of the accession criteria. The more ready they will be, the more they are likely to enter the EU once the window of opportunity is open again.

Last but not least, the EU citizens should learn more about the EU affairs. This goal can be attained only if they feel that the EU is able to improve their lives, and if information on the EU is available and comprehensible. For this reason, the EU institutions and national governments should develop policies that would explain the EU, the competences of the EU and the enlargement process to the citizens.

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