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Article

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EU Enlargement: Expanding the Union and Its Potential

On 23 June, the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and acknowledged the eligibility of Georgia – an act that would not have been possible, in reality, without the egregious assault on Ukraine by Russia. While the countries were given candidate status at record speed, it is unlikely that the accession process will be as swift. The set criteria are difficult for any candidate country to meet – much less one with an active conflict on its territory. However, this symbolic gesture of support and solidarity created momentum for much needed reform and restarted the debate about the role of the EU as a geopolitical actor.

In the first four months of Russia's war on Ukraine, EU citizens' wave of solidarity helped to consolidate the EU's political response (European Commission, 2022a; Mascherini, 2022). Ukrainian citizens are also overwhelmingly in favour of EU integration. According to a recent survey, shown in Figure 1, around 90% of Ukrainians support their country's accession to the EU (support for Ukraine joining NATO is around 76%). Public support for EU membership has hovered around 60% since 2015, but in March 2022 it rose steeply across all age groups and geographic areas (Rating Group Ukraine, 2022).

Over three-quarters of Ukrainians believe that their country will join the EU in the next ten years: 40% believe that the accession will happen over the next one to two years, 29% of respondents expect this process to take up to five years and 14% think that Ukraine will become an EU member within five to ten years (see Figure 2). Only around 3% of all respondents have a more realistic idea of how long it could take for Ukraine to become a member of the EU, namely up to 20 years. Such unrealistic expectations will certainly lead to disappointment.

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The process of joining the EU is long and arduous (Sapir, 2022; Dabrowski, 2022). Finland and Sweden are the only member states that took less than five years to join – from submitting their applications to becoming EU members. On average, it took EU member states around ten years to complete the steps of this complex process involving long and complicated negotiations, while Turkey has been a candidate for EU membership since 1999.

Deeply entrenched social, economic and political power structures in Ukraine pose a serious challenge to its bid to join the EU (Sapir, 2022). Candidate status is the first step on the long path of reform in the country's judicial system and government. However, "Politics is the process by which a society chooses the rules that will govern it" (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012, 79), and a credible EU membership perspective has strong potential to transform the candidate countries' politics.

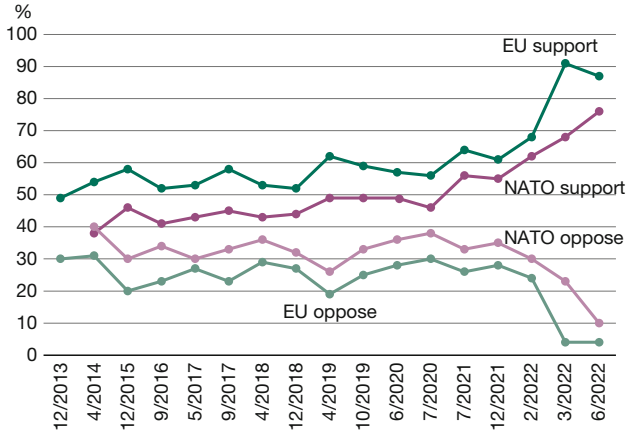
Public opinion can change very fast. It is therefore all the more important that the symbolic gesture of declaring Ukraine a candidate for membership in the face of Russia's aggression should be supported by steps, from both sides, to fortify Europe's unity around its common values and move towards greater integration (Sologoub, 2022).

Obstacles to enlargement

Not only are candidate countries required to fulfil numerous conditions and to harmonise rules and standards on issues ranging from taxation to pet travel. The Union's capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration is an additional obstruction (European Council, 1993). The war in Ukraine has led to a reassessment of approaches to the EU in a number of member states. However, the European consensus on offering Ukraine and Moldova EU candidate status does not automatically translate into a common position on the EU's capacity to take in new members. There remain a number of concerns regarding the pending expansion.

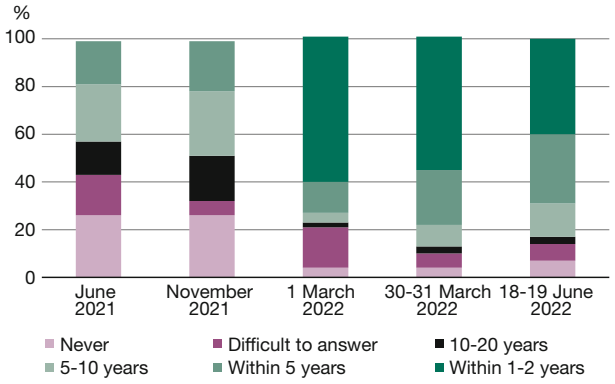
One that is not related to Ukraine itself is known as "enlargement fatigue" (Balfour and Stratulat, 2012). The objection is that the governance of an ever-expanding EU becomes very difficult, as countries are not at the same

Figure 1
Ukrainian citizens' views on EU and NATO integration



Source: Rating Group Ukraine, 2022.

Figure 2
Ukrainian citizens' beliefs about duration of EU accession process



Source:Rating Group Ukraine, 2022.

level of economic development, or indeed of quality of institutions. This objection echoes the concern that the EU has not been able to really absorb the last waves of enlargement. And it should not be forgotten that a number of countries in the Western Balkans are in line to join, but are still far from meeting the necessary requirements.

Another reason has more to do directly with Ukraine: EU enlargement has now acquired a geopolitical meaning (Van der Loo and Van Elsuwege, 2022). The emergence of China had brought the world to a state of greater economic competition rather than cooperation. The war in Ukraine has deepened geopolitical divisions and forced the EU to step up its global role in a myriad of ways.

Countries in the EU will break their dependence on Russian energy in a number of months, not years. They will invest more in their military power and reconsider military alliances in ways that might have been unthinkable only a few months ago – Sweden and Finland joining NATO, for example. Crucial to all this, however, is what the relationship between the EU and Russia will be in the medium to long run.

Will Russia continue to be the uncomfortable neighbour to the east, or can there be a peaceful coexistence? All agree that as Europe re-arms, Ukraine's role in this relationship will be crucial. But not all agree that the EU's interests are best served with Ukraine as a full EU member. Some see it as a buffer between the EU and Russia. Others believe that Ukraine as a full member is a safer counterweight to Russia.

The EU's geopolitical engagement has been importantly shaped and even guided by Russia's military moves. The war in Ukraine has laid bare the weaknesses of the EU as a geopolitical actor, particularly its energy dependence and complete lack of a coordinated defence strategy. While individual member states are taking the urgent steps necessary to severely limit and ideally completely wean themselves off of Russian gas and oil, it will take time and coordination in order to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. Long-term structural reforms are necessary to address the new geopolitical landscape created by Russia's war in Ukraine and enable the EU to uphold its treaty commitments and aspirations.

European security

The EU is currently witnessing another of Russia's military invasions of its sovereign neighbour following the annexation of Crimea and occupation of the Donbas in 2014 and its invasion of Georgia in 2008. And while the EU is not capable of offering its members security guarantees, it is also unable to guarantee its current members peace and security as long as these conflicts rage on. Russia's wars fully intend to destabilise and disrupt the democratic institutions of these states. Akhvlediani (2022, 226) argues that bringing the Associated Trio countries into the EU will deliver "a strong political message to Russia that the EU is committed to restoring peace on the European continent."

The war in Ukraine has also reignited a conversation about Europe's own security capabilities. EU members acted immediately to impose restrictive measures on Russian financial institutions and some of the heaviest sanctions yet on its oil and gas industry, while the European Peace Facility has been activated to support Ukrainian armed forces with a budget of €1.5 billion and Ukrain-

ian nationals fleeing the war have been given temporary protection in the surrounding member states. Still there are those who believe that while this is a start, it is not enough and advocate for the EU to become a hard power (Borrell, 2022). The United States has long advocated for NATO members to increase their contributions to meet the 2% goal. Within days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the German Bundestag voted to increase defense spending by €100 billion – a move that was unthinkable just a week earlier.

Bernard (2022, 231) describes the need for the EU to provide a minimum guarantee of security to its members: "because the rule of law requires a sovereign state that is indisputable in its territorial integrity, its population and the existence of a legitimate government." To do so the EU needs to agree upon a doctrine regarding a state whose territorial integrity, population and government are being threatened. The EU must clearly communicate to the state in question where it stands with regards to it relationship to the EU.

Still, the EU is right to worry about becoming ungovernable. And there is a valid concern that enlarging goes against the ability to integrate more deeply. Taking more countries in makes it harder or simply impossible for those that want to cooperate more closely. This tension has given rise to the idea of going at different speeds (Pisani-Ferry et al., 2016).

Differentiated integration

While Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate country status at record speed, it is unlikely that the accession process will be as rapid. The set criteria are difficult for any candidate country to meet – much less one with an active conflict on its territory.

The Commission has repeatedly stated that its "enlargement policy is a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, security and economic growth in the whole of Europe" (e.g. European Commission, 2021, 25). Yet the lack of progress in EU enlargement to the Western Balkans has undermined the credibility of the EU and the effectiveness of its enlargement policy (Dabrowski, 2022; Fouéré, 2022). Enlargement is a strong geopolitical instrument and could bring the candidate countries closer to the EU sphere of influence, however, traditional paths to membership may need to be reconsidered.

Due to the fact that some EU members are reluctant to enlarge the EU without deepening it first, it is necessary to look at differentiated forms of European integration for candidate countries. This would mean something that is more than the current Association Agreements but not yet full EU membership (Sapir, 2022). The heterogeneity, in terms of preferences and conditions, is extremely large among European countries, and therefore various forms of differentiated integration need to be considered both within the EU and between the EU and the countries outside the EU. This is particularly urgent given not only the current situation but the understandably mounting frustration of the Western Balkan countries, who have grown wary of the drawn-out process.

In order to ease tensions and facilitate the process, it may be helpful to consider a differentiated format in which members would adhere to core policies such as the single market, but could choose to be part of various groups or partnerships. French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the creation of a European Political Community that would give the opportunity to all Council of Europe members outside the EU to become part of the EU's life (French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2022). Another variation is a Continental Partnership (Pisani-Ferry, 2016), which could establish a single market between the countries belonging to the European single market and other interested European countries.

The EU's enlargement policy could act as a coordinating mechanism for its foreign and security policies. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has succeeded in uniting the EU's members around strategic goals and security threats in a way that nothing else could. The failure to coalesce around a common foreign and security policy increased the EU's dependency on Russian energy supplies, thereby filling Russia's war coffers that have allowed Putin to initiate this brutal and increasingly lengthy conflict.

Granting Ukraine candidate status provided an opportunity to reflect on the enlargement process. While it was the right thing to do to show support and solidarity while sending Putin a warning, EU enlargement is a demanding and lengthy process that requires a unanimous decision and the EU needs to address the setbacks attached to this process. A differentiated process may be required in order to reform its enlargement policy, a particularly important step necessitated by the urgency of the times.

Conclusions

Over the past decades, the European unification project seemed to rely largely on progress in economic terms, but the rationale behind the European Coal and Steel Community was to support cross-border cooperation in the most fundamental industries in order to promote peace in Europe (Grabbe, 2012). And Europe was peaceful. The founders of the European project envisaged and

created an ambitious – and indeed successful – reconciliation project. Will Russia's war on Ukraine transform the current EU and its enlargement in order to give real meaning to the idea of the European Union as a community of values?

The new EU member candidates, as well as those who have had this status for a decade, present the Union with an opportunity to decide what kind of club it should be. As a club of like-minded countries, it will no doubt be easier to manage from the inside. But it will also be entrenching the differences of views, which will make cooperation with the non-like-minded considerably more difficult.

Or it can be a sphere of influence that appreciates that global problems cannot be addressed by engaging only with the like-minded. Global issues, from climate change to nuclear disarmament, mean there is more need to engage with those that think differently. Such a club would need to rethink and innovate in terms of how it integrates its increasingly diverse members. But it would be a club worth joining.

Irrespective of which direction the EU takes, the arguments that made it possible for the Ukraine to become a candidate country in June despite any expectations also mean that Ukraine will remain a special case. While the EU countries decide what kind of club the EU is, they will also need to deal with the very special position in which the Russian invasion has put Ukraine. This will no doubt create challenges for other candidate or aspiring countries that must be carefully managed.

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