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The EU eastern enlargement from today's perspective

Ionelia Bianca BOSOANĂ*

Abstract

This paper discusses the major challenges for the present European Commission, starting with Brexit and ending with issues such as EU Eastern Enlargement from today's perspectives, trying to explain why it is difficult to talk about enlargement in a fragmented European Union. How will the European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations evolve in the actual mandate of the European Commission? Did the European Commission succeed in offering Eastern states the opportunity to join the European Union by developing instruments encouraging states to meet the accession criteria? A qualitative analysis will be used to highlight the novelty elements analyzed by the proposed theme; the author uses a study case using as research instruments discourse and content analysis. Therefore, the main objective of this research paper is to highlight how the European leaders' discourse on a possible enlargement of the European Union has evolved.

Keywords: European Union, European Neighborhood Policy, challenges, enlargement, perspectives

Introduction

Nowadays, the European Union is one of the best models of cooperation between European states, a model replicated on the basis of economic cooperation, principles, values, beliefs and other elements forming the European identity (Warleigh-Lack, 2008, p.15). This is also due to the changing expectations of European States regarding the opportunities offered by the European Union, i.e., they felt that, in exchange for the sovereignty given to the European Union, they would receive other national privileges. Increasing their responsibility comes along with a number of requirements from European States and, sometimes, with disputes on the part of the States dissatisfied with their privileges.

The European Union, as it exists today, derives from thousands of large and small political negotiations (Kotlowski and Hoff, 2000, p.16). Member States have transferred some decisions to a supranational body internal policy (Dedman, 1996, p.7). The difficult road that the European Union has been going through over half a century has been one full of obstacles in terms of negotiations

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between States, but also of concessions between them because, without these two extremely important elements, today's European Union would not have survived. Behind these ongoing negotiations were people with persuasion, who put pressure on states to renounce some of their national prerogatives and hand them over to the supranational level.

The European Union enlargement remains a sensitive topic for Members of the European Commission but also for the Member States because Member States' representatives advocate for other national priorities. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union gives States the legal basis by which they may accede to the European Union. The Article states that "any European country which respects the EU values set out in the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and which undertakes to promote these values may apply to become a Member of the EU" (Treaty on European Union, 2012). A second criterion that States must take into account is to meet the Copenhagen criteria. These new criteria established that the process of a new state's accession to the European Union would only take place if it had the strategic capacity to integrate new members, and membership will take place once the country is able to take on its membership obligations by meeting the required economic and political conditions (Treaty on European Union, 2012).

There is currently a number of States that have applied for accession to the European Union but whose request has only been made clear on the waiting list of countries that wish to join the European Union.

Throughout the previous mandate of the European Commission which had a difficult portfolio because it has to deal with strong issues such as Brexit, expansion of terrorism, rise of Euroscepticism and loss of citizens' trust in the European values, it is hard to have an optimistic perspective with reference to the EU Eastern Enlargement.

This paper discusses the major challenges for the present European Commission, starting with Brexit and ending with issues such as EU Eastern Enlargement from today's perspectives, trying to explain why it is difficult to talk about enlargement in a fragmented European Union. It is simple when we talk about countries where convergence criteria are not met, but it is complicated when we talk about states with ethnic problems or states with frozen conflicts, which are far from being resolved. Here, the chances of possible integration into the future are extremely low.

In this paper, a qualitative analysis will be used to highlight the novelty elements analyzed by the proposed theme. As a research method of this paper, the author proposes a case study using discourse analysis and content analysis as research instruments. Discourse analysis helps us to outline some variables (persuasion, context and actions) to explain how the European leaders' discourse on a possible enlargement of the European Union has evolved! There are some research questions

developed in this paper - How will the European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations evolve in the actual mandate of the European Commission? Did the European Commission succeed in offering Eastern states the opportunity to join the European Union by developing instruments encouraging states to meet the accession criteria? What is the EU Eastern Enlargement from today's perspective?

1. A European Union full of challenges

This subchapter will discuss the challenges for the European Union, trying to highlight present perspectives for the development of a new enlargement. The analysis will capture the current tendencies and vulnerabilities of the European Union.

The achievement of the European Union was a complex process, which started from the idea of cooperation between European States, followed by complementary policies, common values and beliefs of Member States that wanted to join to the European Union. Building the trust of the Member States and their leaders was one of the most difficult challenges in the construction process because there were many tense moments between them and, many times, hatred between States was more important than the beneficial results for their economies. There were egos and nationalist demands, and the road to ideal was increasingly assiduous. We can even say that the European Union was built from a series of failures of previous constructions but, following the logical thread of the succession of events, we can see that the idea has been preserved over time - let us just say that it has been slightly polished to reach today's result.

The current prototype of the European Union is not a perfect one; although it has undergone many reconfigurations throughout history, it is subject to change and often faced with crises. This is due to uncertainty, technological evolution, but also to the new dangers facing humanity. For the latter, it seems that the European Union has not been equipped with a success recipe, but with the policy specialists' support, it is looking for solutions to solve the problems, thus reconfiguring problems that have not been anticipated so far.

Over time, construction has undergone several institutional changes aimed at facilitating the integration of new states into the current European cooperation structure – the European Union. The treaties were the main legislative instruments for implementing new regulations to help European integration. The European Union has developed means by which European States have been able to adapt to key challenges, such as the rise to better life, economic independence and the provision of stability that will keep States away from a new World War. Countries have learned over the years

that cooperation is important to achieve the objectives, which must be ensured in the integration process (Warleigh-Lack, 2009, p. 10).

The new era has brought a lot of challenges which Europe has had to face, with European integration being the key challenge for the European Union. Yugoslavia's violent disintegration has increased pressure on the European Union, prompting it to develop its foreign policy, security and defense capabilities against external threats. The free movement of people has required increased cooperation in the management of the EU's external borders, visa coordination, – replace, it doesn't make sense and police cooperation across borders. There have also been pressing environmental challenges. Equally, eager to address the inadequacies of the previous reform, the follow-up to the work agenda and integration projects (Phinnemore, 2013, p.5), EU supporters were planning to further integrate the accession countries.

There is now a dangerous mix between political wear and economic stress, between the current formal limitations and structural and material challenges. The combination of politics and economy is pushing the European Union to instability at systemic risk (Laursen, 2012, p.97).

The current challenge is the unstable external context, whether we are talking about frozen conflicts, social and economic crises, political conflicts between States, the issue of Euroscepticism or challenges arising from the possibility of enlargement of the European Union. When Europe is in one of the situations mentioned above, the first attempt is to return to the text of the treaties in force and to negotiate compromise between States or to find public policy solutions that will solve the current problems facing the States.

Another key factor in explaining the continuing controversy between Member States is the diversity of persistent ambitions between the Member States of the European Union. Some countries continue to be generally supportive of the idea that the EU should become a form of federation, and others continue to expect the EU to offer them more tools. One of the major factors contributing to the controversy over the EU reform process is that there are different options as to how a problem needs to be addressed and that no one will be fully covered by the compromise it creates (Warleigh-Lack, year, p. 10).

In a compromise for a country that brings a legislative proposal that it deems necessary for the whole European Union, discussions will arise that that compromise only has a political stake and that it was not necessary to be addressed as a matter for the whole of the European Union. This is where long negotiations start, where states are relying on alliances to support their own ideas by offering compromises in exchange for mutual benefits.

1.1. Brexit

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was officially declared a Member of the European Economic Community in 1973. Although the British were invited to join the initiative for cooperation between European States from the start of the project, they were not interested because they were in a favorable and stable position in relation to the countries that were deeply affected after World War II. After about fifty years of EU membership, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland decided to leave the bloc on 23 June 2016: UK citizens with voting rights participated in the polls to decide whether Britain should stay in or leave the European Union. The success of the 51.89% pro-departure vote astonished not only the British public, but also the big political parties, voting organizations, and the media, not to mention the majority of political scientists. The result of the vote also brought together their continental counterparts who, until then, did not believe such a result possible. Despite the numerous crises experienced by the European continent, national and supranational authorities have not anticipated the possibility of Brexit (Martill and Staiger, 2018, p.4).

The period immediately following the outcome of the referendum and 2020 was an extremely tensioned, full of uncertainties and complex negotiations between the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

This post-Brexit process has been highly criticized by political analysts but also by Member States and all actors who took part in the debate on the UK-EU relationship after leaving the bloc. It was clear from the outset that no consensus would be reached to resolve all the claims raised by the negotiating actors, but one of the most sensitive issues of the issue and a key Brexit debate was linked to the citizens.

Although we have seen a prolonged process of negotiations between the European Union and Britain and a first departure from the Community bloc by a European state, the question which arises is whether the European Union is ready for enlargement in the next five or ten years? On the other hand, there are Eurosceptics who rule out the possibility of a new wave of accession from the outset, even talking about the possibility of other European States following the example of Britain and wanting to leave the European construction.

1.2. The euroscepticism phenomenon

Another risk caused by Brexit is the increase in populism at the Member States' level, a trend which is intensified on the basis of the populist discourse of political leaders and the nationalism of the European Union Member States. Populists or Euro-sceptics, as I called them, try to manipulate the masses in favor of the growth of the polls and to gain them by talking about national principles, state sovereignty and the limitation of the decision-making power in the framework declared by the rules coming from Brussels.

Euroscepticism is growing and anti-European activity characterized by the founding States of the Union itself, as well. States like Ukraine, Republic of Moldova or Turkey are against EU institutions, its expansion and the Schengen area. The free movement of people is starting to be disapproved and becomes a strong reason against the effectiveness of joining the European Union. In this respect, religion becomes a sensitive point and solidarity is coming out of the landscape, because we wonder: Is it possible to stand together even if our specificity is restricted? Obviously, the answer is no, and this response is the basis of Euroscepticism.

The rise in polls of parties with Eurosceptic visions can be seen as a threat to the future of the European Union. This may be a problem, because the story of Brexit can be repeated with other States that could jeopardize the EU project and contribute to its breakdown. For this reason, it is important that the European Union does not focus its efforts on the UK's penalty for Brexit, but rather on resolving its pain points and rethinking its instruments of action to prevent the increase in Eurosceptic trends within the European Union. The Union needs a new breath, which will restore confidence to those who no longer believe in the effectiveness of the structure and the benefits it brings to the European continent.

2. European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations

Smith argues that enlargement was a means by which the European Union deliberately develops its broader foreign policy capacity by developing new instruments and ideas that are portable in the problematic areas of foreign policy (Smith, 2004). Given the external dangers at Europe's borders, the European Union has tried to facilitate the accession of States to this structure in order to secure its European borders. Member States have been given the necessary instruments for economic development but also instruments for action against external threats. Accession to the European Union has also been closely linked to NATO membership, a structure that aims to provide States with

support against foreign threats. Although today there are States calling for strengthening PESCO and for creating a common European army, thereby abandoning the dependence on NATO and its ties with the US, the new European defense structure is not able to ensure the deployment of European citizens. The European army is now a French old dream of being back in the spotlight and becoming a new power at European level, but also a subject trying to gain political support.

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was developed to promote prosperity, stability and security within the EU's neighbours and to avoid new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its neighbours. Home Affairs issues remain a priority.

The EU offers its neighbours a privileged relationship, building upon common values (democracy and human rights, rule of law, good governance, market economy principles and sustainable development). Ambitions for the relationship depend on the extent to which these values are shared (European Commission).

The benefits of EU enlargement are: increased prosperity for all Member States: 3 times more trade between old and new Member States, 5 times more between new Member States; greater stability in Europe; a stronger role for the EU on the world stage (Consiliul European, 2021).

The renewed consensus on enlargement agreed at the December 2006 European Council continues to guide EU enlargement policy. EU leaders agreed to follow a strategy based on: Strengthening the EU's commitments to the ongoing accession negotiations; fair and rigorous conditionality at all stages of the negotiations with candidate countries; increased transparency and better communication, to ensure broad and sustained public support: The EU's capacity to integrate new members.

For the European Union, enlargement to Central and Eastern European States is of great political interest and this is linked to the role of European integration in preserving peace and democracy. If the EU were to reject enlargement to the East, it would have discouraged the countries of Central and Eastern Europe from the reform process. By promising accession to the European Union, it opens up the prospects for security and welfare for these countries.

It is unlikely that in the coming years there will be new accessions by states to the European Union due to their difficulties in failing to meet accession criteria. If these countries remain excluded from the enlargement process, they can be kept in a peripheral position, which could make them less attractive, especially in terms of foreign investment, whose role is essential in the transition process. At the internal level, this enlargement will have an impact on the nature and functioning of the EU institutions, the enlargement being preceded by a reform of the Community institutions so that their functioning is efficient.

The extension of the European Union's borders to Eastern Europe raises a number of questions. This is because of the peculiarities of non-member states. We have the example of the Republic of Moldova, where the question of whether the Republic of Moldova has any chance to enter the European Union in a near future is a firm no. The first explanation is very simple: The European Union cannot receive a country with unclear borders with foreign troops on its territory.

Secondly, it is that of the countries in the process of transition to a market-economy system. This is reflected in the special conditions for accession imposed by the Copenhagen Summit in 1993, namely stable democracy, a competitive market economy and the adoption of the *acquis Communautaire*.

The differences in income between the EU and EU candidate countries was very large. These gaps give rise to tensions and major problems - Enlargement to the East threatens the Union with a stronger migration wave than that of previous enlargements. The labour force from Eastern European countries tends to migrate to Western Europe in search of better living conditions than in the countries of origin. This migration brings losses to the economy of less developed countries, creating development gaps between Member States.

Economic challenges and vulnerabilities are numerous and complex. The whole sense of human society is a competition for power, more specifically, for the means and mechanisms of power, which are primarily economic and financial.

At present, discussions about enlargements for countries such as Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia are not currently on the agenda. The main problem is the fact that a decision regarding the accession of a new state must be approved with a unanimous vote of the Member States and, nowadays, states have a political interest in other specific problems, other than integration issues.

It is known that the European Union is determined to continue its expansion in the future in the Western Balkans countries, especially after the dispute with Greece over the name of Northern Macedonia has been resolved. When it comes to Turkey's accession, things are much more complicated. Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova have no real prospects of joining the European Union in the next few years, as they, too, are far from joining the Euro-building process.

Under these circumstances, the question arises as to whether, in the future, when the European Union is ready to receive them in the community, they will still be interested in joining it?

I think everything will depend on the time it runs until the countries become eligible to join the European Union. It is known that the European States currently joining the European Union do not meet the convergence criteria for joining this structure. It is clear that years will pass by the time of the accession and it is possible that the states will change their priorities and political guidelines. The

European States in the Eastern Neighborhood of the European Union are positioning themselves at the confluence between two extremely strong players - the European Union and Russia - a diametrically opaque player, who, in turn, have an interest in attracting States to one of the two camps.

The vision of the ruling political party has an important mission to decide to join or stay outside the European Union. Efforts towards accession need to be backed up by a plan and concrete actions in this direction. Although the European Union would offer them new prospects for economic and social development, Russia may come up with a counter-offer for the candidate countries. So, for this reason, it is very difficult to anticipate a future integration for the states that are far from being able to be integrated in the near future. It is happening in States such as the Republic of Moldova, Belarus or Ukraine. It is not difficult to explain why excise countries are far from being integrated into the European Union.

The answer to the question whether the Republic of Moldova has any chance to enter the European Union in the near future is a firm no. The first explanation is very simple: The European Union cannot get a country with unclear borders and which has foreign troops on its territory (Russian forces in Transnistria, in the case of Moldova).

Yes, we have agreements signed with the EU, which we see as a possibility to change the situation and quality of life in Moldova. But I do not think Moldova will become a Member of the EU. Europe itself is not ready for enlargement. Some countries are even leaving the EU. But the agreements we have with the EU are an opportunity to use their experience, financial resources to change the situation in the Republic of Moldova (Dodon, 2019)

The President of the Republic of Moldova tends towards closer cooperation with Russia, at the moment this alliance is easier to sustain than a possible accession to the European Union. He added that we must fortify these relationships, these are our traditional markets, they are our brothers. That is why we must turn the strategic partnership to this direction as well (Dodon, 2019).

Another question is whether the European Union will invest in the future in the neighbourhood policy to support States that are not members of the European Union?

President Jean-Claude Juncker said that the European Union has achieved impressive results in supporting investment outside the EU. But we could achieve much more if we worked together more effectively and more closely. We do not need new institutions or groups of wise men to achieve our goals: we need wise decisions, taken quickly with our existing structures and our partners (European Commission, 2018 a).

The incentive-based approach (more for more) has succeeded in supporting reforms in the areas of good governance, democracy, the rule of law and human rights, insofar as there has been a commitment from partner countries to these reforms. However, where there was no political will, this

approach has not proved strong enough to allow commitments to reforms. In these cases, the EU will seek to find more effective ways of supporting the opportunity to initiate fundamental reforms, including through cooperation with civil, economic and social actors in the dialogue with its partners (European Commission, 2015, p.5).

The European Union is aware that the potential of these countries to adopt new reforms to be eligible for integration is rather low, which is also the main reason for financially reverting these countries on its borders. The European Neighbourhood Policy was launched with the aim of avoiding the formation of new dividing lines between the EU extended neighbours. Also, it promotes prosperity, security of borders, democratization and a good governance for non-EU states.

3. Enlargement progress during European Commission mandates

For the qualitative analysis proposed for this article, I have chosen for analysis the speech of three distinguished personalities from the European Commission, namely: José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission between 2004 to 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission between 2014 to 2019 and Ursula von der Leyen, the current President of the European Commission. Although all three presidents of the European Commission have addressed the issue of EU enlargement in their speeches, it is worth noting that only during Barroso's mandate, there were multiple accessions of new states to the European Union.

During the José Manuel Barroso's mandate, he managed the biggest enlargement of the European Union in early 2004, a few months before taking responsibility. Juncker addressed this issue during his mandate, but no state has been able to enter the European Union. It is known that this enlargement has also brought a number of challenges and, yet, new States have been interposed throughout its mandate. The increase in the European Union budget, but also the expansion of the continental borders has been one of the main benefits of this new enlargement.

A success of the Barroso Commission has also been the preservation of the integrity of the euro area, which has not collapsed, as many feared at the beginning of the economic crisis. Moreover, the common currency has emerged from turbulent times with new fiscal governance rules designed to prevent possible future slippages (Economica, 2014).

A substantial critique against Barroso's mandate is related to the difficult 'digestion' of enlargement to the east which has weakened the internal cohesion of the Community building, and there are opinions that the European Union was not prepared to take on such a wide scale enlargement (Economica, 2014).

It is true that enlargement was not even a priority for Juncker's mandate although he admitted that this topic was a historic success for the European Union. He said that the European Union and our citizens need to adapt to the accession of 13 Member States to the EU, in ten years the European Union must take a break in enlargement so that what has been achieved among the 28 Member States could be strengthened. For this reason, when I am President of the Commission, the ongoing negotiations will continue and, in particular, the Western Balkans will have to retain a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place in the next five years. With the countries of the Eastern Neighborhood, such as Moldova or Ukraine, we need to promote closer cooperation, association and partnership in order to further strengthen our economic and political ties (European Commission, 2014, p.12). There is not enough Europe in this Union. Next year, in his speech, Jean-Claude Juncker continued the idea of a strong European Union *and emphasized that there is not enough Union in this Union* (European Commission, 2015). *The vision of a more united, stronger and more democratic Europe I am outlining combines elements from all scenarios I set out in March. But our future cannot remain a simple scenario, a sketch, an idea amongst others* (European Commission, 2017). There can therefore be not a moment's respite in our efforts to build a more united Europe. Europe can export stability, as we have done with the successive enlargements of our Union. For me, these are and will remain success stories – for we were able to reconcile Europe's history and geography (European Commission, 2018 b).

The European Union is still not allowing itself to expand the number of Member States, as an extended formula would be much more difficult to manage. We note that since the last accession in 2013, no state in the process of joining the European Union has been able to meet the criteria and become a full member.

The taking over of the new term of the European Commission by Ursula von der Leyen also brings no new perspectives for the integration of the Eastern Neighborhood States into the European Union. On the contrary, taking office finds the European Union in an even greater deadlock. Britain's departure from the EU bloc, the deepening of Euroscepticism and the issue of climate change were the main topics of the European agenda.

Her discourse, *State of the Union* address, at the European Parliament Plenary seems to be even worse in September 2020. The Coronavirus pandemic that has affected all European States exposes the fragility around us and how easy uncertainty can be propagated and further increase the uncertainty of how to overcome this obstacle which humanity faces (European Commission, 2020). She encourages states by saying that we must continue to handle this pandemic with extreme care, responsibility and unity for building a stronger European Health Union (European Commission,

2020). At a first glance, we can see that the focus is on the health component and on building a close link between European countries in the fight against the invisible virus.

The second component is the task of the European Union to provide the stability needed by our economies. This is a remarkable moment of unity for our Union. This is an achievement that we should take collective pride in (European Commission, 2020). Nowadays, Europe is more fragile than in the past and it is urgent to find solutions.

The only references to the countries in the European Union's neighbourhood are related to the fact that it will build up relations of cooperation in the future and support them financially. She added that people must be free to decide their own future without any implication in election meddling. She ensures that we will also be there for the Eastern Partnership countries and our partners in the southern neighbourhood– to help create jobs and kickstart their economies (European Commission, 2021).

Following the speeches of the three presidents, we can see the prospects for the future enlargement of the European Union are extremely modest in the near future. There are no new enlargements, and all the more so since the European Union is facing increasing challenges coming from outside and from within every year. The current crises facing the European Union have become increasingly acute and the current challenge is to succeed in staying together with the 27 States. With regard to the partnerships with non-Member countries, the European Union aims to support their financial support and cooperation initiatives in the future by developing partnership relations that help secure the borders of the European Union.

Conclusions

At the end of this article, I prepared some conclusions. I will start with the benefits brought by the European Union enlargement. The enlargement of the European Union to Central and Eastern European countries is, alongside monetary unification, the major challenge in the history of the integration process in Europe, the rise of the EU budget and more pillars of regional developments.

Currently, the extension to the east is likely to occur from the perspective of the fact that the European Union is currently focusing on the consolidation of the structure, rather than on a new process of extension. Critics emphasize the fact that a new extension would lead to the complete dissolution of the European Union. In the context of Britain's exit, it is time for the European Union to deepen European integration and close the gaps in the enlargement process towards the eastern border of the European Union. The European Union wants to develop new instruments for cooperation between the Member States and the Eastern Neighbourhood, thus avoiding a new wave

of accession that would destabilize the European Union. There are no real prospects for future membership from Eastern Europe states but there are some initiatives for supporting those states. Overcoming the current obstacles will demonstrate European Union's Member States that only together will they be a stronger international player and could, therefore, overcome all obstacles.

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