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ENLARGEMENT WORKS, WHY STOP NOW?

Deniz Devrim

Research Fellow – Europe

Mary Jane O'Leary

Research Assistant – Europe

The EU, once a synonym for electoral success in Ukraine, has been dropped unceremoniously from this year's presidential election debates. The lingering pessimism in Ukraine towards the EU has domestic as well as EU-related explanations, but there is no doubt that the EU's procrastination in offering membership perspectives has discoloured reform processes in its eastern neighbourhood. Promises by the EU appear noncommittal, and tangible signs of EU participation in the region are few and far between. This not only thwarts the incentives to reform and thus, affects public opinion in individual countries, but also reflects a disconcerting approach to the very definition of the concept that is Europe.

It is well known that the history of European integration began in France and Germany but it is increasingly uncertain as to where it will end. In most cases, it is the EU itself that is responsible for the confusion in this discussion. For instance, some European neighbours of the EU, such as Serbia or Turkey, are granted the right to become EU members while others, such as Ukraine or Moldova – no less European than Turkey or Serbia – are denied this perspective. Traditionally, the classic uncertainty as to where the eastern boundary of Europe lies permitted the development of a conveniently vague understanding of political interdependence gradually extending east. As long as the carrots on offer attracted nearby amenable states there was no rush to define the notion of enlargement, to predict where the EU's borders would stop, or to delineate once and for all those who were in and those who were out of the project. With the creation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, it has become increasingly apparent that there are now European countries which might never be invited to join the European club. Even if their prospects for joining are never explicitly denied, few aspiring members have missed the sub-text: if you are in the Neighbourhood you are outside the accession fence.

In his recent appointments to the new European Commission, Commission President José Manuel Barroso joined the enlargement and neighbourhood portfolios under the one administrative roof. It would be understandable if some neighbourhood countries saw this as a small step in the direction of their own future accession, considering they are now joined in administrative matrimony with advanced EU candidates such as Croatia. However, the opposite

is more akin to reality. European neighbours such as Moldova and Ukraine, are now lumped in with North African and Middle Eastern countries such as Algeria and Syria, for whom - it is mutually recognised - EU accession is simply not on the cards. In any case, no consideration can belie the immutable fact of Ukraine's, Moldova's and Belarus' actual geographic Europeanness, nor can there be any denial of the importance of a stable Caucasus for a stable Europe. A more meaningful EU strategy would therefore have been an administrative amalgamation of these eastern neighbours, each of which is part of the so-called Eastern Partnership, together with the enlargement countries under one roof in the Commission.

The key to understanding recent distortions in the enlargement discourse is in the wave of enlargement fatigue that spread rapidly throughout the EU following the 2004 and 2007 accessions. As populations in the EU became less enthusiastic about enlargement, new and more ambiguous approaches to the policy began to emerge. Instead of offering EU perspectives to potential members, proponents of a more closed EU began to elaborate the concept of concentric circles of interaction between the EU and its neighbours. The concept allows for specific levels of limited interaction with the EU, rather than foreseeing eventual and full integration.

The idea of a reinvigorated enlargement policy may be unpopular in the member states, but a cause for optimism is emerging on the eastern horizon. In Moldova, the governing coalition, Alliance for European Integration, is working to stabilize its shaky pro-EU government; meanwhile Georgia recently turned its focus from NATO to EU membership. The EU should respond to these developments with a concrete offer of EU integration, while acknowledging of course the very long term character of such a perspective. Despite routine obfuscation of the term 'enlargement', there is no way to obscure that enlargement has driven the EU's success and that the EU's capacity to absorb new members has proven its most useful and transformative characteristic. Attaching democratic and normative conditions to increased integration for potential candidates has driven transformation in Eastern Europe while new members have provided labour, skills, cultural diversity and new languages, as well as business and trade opportunities. Enlargement, as a concept and a policy, is bringing Europe steadily closer to the benefits of lasting peace, stability, democracy, shared welfare, human rights and cohesion, it should be recognised and re-defined as such as soon as possible.

Enlargement as a discourse and a policy needs to be reinvigorated both within the EU and at a domestic level in the eastern neighbourhood, returning it to the path it has been led away from. It should be endowed with the broad understanding of a Wider Europe and reconciled with the ideal that no European country can be denied a European Union perspective. Such an enlargement policy would recognise that there is no logic or consistency in letting Serbia in and leaving Ukraine out if they both fulfil the criteria for accession. There is no denial that absorbing new members is a difficult task, however, for the EU to renege now on one of its defining policies, the achievements made under the rubric of conditionality and value-based relations, will dissipate along with its credibility. Without the prospect of joining and partaking fully in the benefits of the EU there is no incentive for non-EU countries to reform or to consolidate their fledgling democracies. The short-term benefits accrued by governments tightening their grip on power will outweigh the long-term benefits of democratising in exchange for the meagre scraps offered by European integration. The EU will inevitably lose its leverage and in the very long run miss the opportunities for the greater advantages of a peaceful, stable, integrated and prosperous Europe.