

A Policy Proposal on the Enlargement of the European Union

Addressing Challenges and Shaping Policy for Future Integration

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What does EU Enlargement Entail?

EU enlargement refers to the process of adding new member states to the Union. Enlargement is a central policy of the EU aimed at promoting peace, stability, and prosperity in Europe. However, recent challenges, including concerns about the integration capacity of the EU, political and economic disparities, and the rise of Euroscepticism, have made the policy more complex. The conflict in Ukraine and geopolitical instability further highlight the relevance of the enlargement debate today.

Why Enlargement Matters Now

The current enlargement candidates include countries from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. The inclusion of these nations would expand the EU's geopolitical influence, ensure economic stability, and promote democratic reforms. However, the process has stalled due to political reluctance from existing member states and the complexities of meeting EU standards, particularly in governance, human rights, and economic readiness.



EU's Current Actions on Enlargement

What the EU is Doing

The EU has established criteria for membership, known as the Copenhagen criteria, which require candidates to meet political, economic, and legal conditions. Countries in the accession process are supported by EU funds aimed at helping them meet these requirements. For example, pre-accession assistance (IPA) provides financial and technical support. Despite these efforts, progress remains slow, particularly for countries like North Macedonia and Albania.

Challenges in Existing Policies

Current Policy Limitations

The EU's enlargement process has faced several hurdles:

- **Political reluctance:** Existing member states, particularly France and the Netherlands, have shown hesitation due to fears of destabilization.
- **Economic disparities:** There is concern about the economic gap between candidate countries and existing EU members.
- **Governance and corruption:** Some candidates struggle with governance and corruption issues, making integration difficult.

Advantages of Current EU Approach

Benefits of the Current Policy

- Encourages political reforms in candidate countries.
- Enhances EU influence in geopolitically strategic regions.
- Promotes economic development and stability in neighboring regions.
- Strengthens the EU's standing as a promoter of democracy and human rights.



Drawbacks of the Current Policy

- **Slow process:** The pace of enlargement is too slow, which can demoralize candidate countries.
- **Integration challenges:** Admitting countries with weaker economies could create internal economic imbalances.
- **Political pushback:** Eurosceptic voices within the EU oppose further expansion, fearing loss of control and increased migration.



Policy Recommendations

What the EU Should Do: Proposed Policy Options

Accelerated Membership Pathways: Introduce fast-track membership options for countries meeting critical democratic and governance standards, with gradual economic integration.

Flexible Membership Models: Consider different levels of membership to allow closer ties with the EU without full accession (e.g., a second-tier membership with fewer obligations).

Strengthened Support Mechanisms: Increase pre-accession funding and technical support for governance reforms.

Implementing New Enlargement Strategies

- Focus on building institutional capacity in candidate countries through dedicated EU programs.
- Strengthen partnerships with NATO to ensure that geopolitical concerns, particularly security, are addressed during enlargement.
- Coordinate with existing member states to address internal opposition by highlighting the economic and security benefits of enlargement.

Measuring Success

Evaluation of New Policy Impact

- Develop clear benchmarks for candidate countries to meet, ensuring transparency in the enlargement process.
- Conduct regular reviews of member states' readiness and EU preparedness to integrate new members without destabilising the Union.



Enlarging the EU for a Stronger Future

EU enlargement, when managed efficiently, can bring stability, economic growth, and greater geopolitical security to Europe. A modernized, strategic enlargement policy will ensure the EU remains influential on the global stage while promoting unity and prosperity within its borders.

