



# The Continuous Challenge of Enlargement

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## Introduction

The 'big bang' enlargement of 2004, followed by the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, has profoundly altered the way the European Union functions. But with hindsight, it turned out that none of the often apocalyptic scenarios predicted before 2004 has materialised: neither was the EU-15 widely swamped with a flood of migrants from its new member countries, nor was the EU budget blooded to death, nor have its structures become paralysed. However, public opinion – and thus politicians – in the old member states give little credit to enlargement, and there is limited appetite for promoting the accession of further member states.

This article tries to analyse the reasons behind the lack of appetite of most EU member states for further enlargement. It will challenge some of the conventional perceptions of enlargement and propose a double approach to get the process back on track: by tackling political challenges from a technical angle and by paying more attention to the perception of enlargement related problems.

## The stumbling blocks: political blockages and public opinion

In 2011, the EU has five candidate countries (Iceland, Croatia, FYROM, Montenegro, Turkey) with whom accession negotiations have either started or are about to start, and four potential candidates (Serbia, Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo) which first have to qualify to become candidates by meeting a number of criteria in the field of political and economic reform. Whereas Croatia (population: 5m) and in particular Iceland (population: 0.3m) raise few concerns due to their size and their relatively little impact their accession will have on the EU, the accession of the other Western Balkan countries is more controversial, due to their poor reputation and to the number of internal problems (such as ethnic conflicts or the lack of rule of law). But the most controversial issue is arguably the country that made by far the biggest progress in its way on adopting European norms and standards: Turkey.

By just looking at the mere technicalities, Turkey's accession does not seem more complicated than the other (potential) candidates: With all its flaws (especially regarding the freedom of expression), it is nevertheless a rather well functioning democracy; it has reasonably well functioning institutions, and makes progress towards EU integration in most of the policy fields that are required by Brussels. However, in reality, the process

grinded to a halt, for two reasons: first, the blockage of the accession negotiations due to the unresolved Cyprus question, with EU member Cyprus vetoing the opening of further negotiation chapters (and the closing of currently open chapters). Second, public opinion in most of the Member countries is negative regarding Turkey's accession<sup>1</sup>.

The freezing of Turkey's accession negotiations, the standstill in EU-NATO relations, and the danger of regional instability in the Western Balkans - due to a failure to address the Kosovo issue - are directly linked to the unresolved Cyprus question. With no solution to these fundamental questions of EU strategic interests in sight, both the enlargement process and the Common Security and Defence Policy risk becoming lame ducks, thus undermining the relevance of the EU as a global player and strategic actor.



### A technical bypass to political problems?

How might these deeply entrenched political blockages be overcome? Here it might be helpful to remember that the process of rebuilding Europe after WWII started as a technical process (with the Coal and Steel Community) before becoming more obviously political. A good recent example of a technical solution to a political problem is the answer found to address the fear of paralysis in EU decision making after the 2004 enlargement: some technical modifications in the Council of Ministers' rules of procedure - hardly spectacular and rarely noticed by people outside the Brussels bubble - had a definite and positive impact and made decision making after 2004 easier than before<sup>2</sup>. In the same way, the freeze of Turkey's accession negotiations and of EU-NATO relations - due to differences between NATO member Turkey and EU member Cyprus - could be overcome by taking a more pragmatic approach (*i.e.* increasing security for EU and NATO staff in Afghanistan as the result of exchange of intelligence between the two organisations), instead of leaving the issue to emotionally charged history-laden political debates in both capitals.

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### Problems and their perception: public opinion matters

The other much underrated challenge to the accession process is public opinion in the member states. This is in particular true with regard to Turkey<sup>3</sup>. Technically, it would be only a question of time before Turkey (and the other candidates) meet the criteria for membership: being fully fledged democracies with a competitive economy that have taken on board the 120,000 pages of EU rules and regulations. But of course, enlargement is also highly political, as any accession (even after the Lisbon Treaty) has to be ratified by all existing members. The governments of the member states know that the perspective of having Turkey as (soon to be) biggest, rather poor and Muslim member - with agenda setting powers - is hardly appealing to most of their voters. Hiding behind the *vox populi* is, in fact, a convenient way for governments to discard the responsibility for the rejection of Turkey on their voters. Turkey might have very strong arguments why the EU would benefit from having it as a member: its economic and demographic dynamism, its role for regional security and stability, as a political bridge to the Muslim world, as a buffer zone towards the Middle East and its moderating influence on Muslims within and outside the borders of the EU.

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Whereas these arguments are relevant and valuable, they are not likely to convince a broader public more susceptible to fears of immigration, of radical Islam and of an EU losing its European character. Therefore, Turkey will eventually realise that this debate cannot be won with rational arguments alone and that they also have to target existing underbelly fears through public diplomacy and perception management<sup>4</sup>. Turkey also will have to realise the extent to which negative public opinion in particular member states is the result of often suboptimal integration of the Turkish diasporas into their host societies and to be more proactive in looking for solutions.

### The EU in 2020: a look into the enlargement crystal ball

At this point, it might be useful to move beyond analysing the existing problems and to engage into some out-of-the-box thinking in order to overcome the current stalemate. The author therefore takes the liberty of offering a hypothetic and optimistic – but maybe not entirely unrealistic – agenda of how the enlargement process could eventually unfold during the next decade:

**2012:** After repeated casualties among EU Police trainers in Afghanistan, Turkey decides to drop its veto on the sharing of NATO intelligence with the EU. Also, in order to put pressure on the incoming Cypriot EU Presidency, Turkey decides unilaterally to open its ports temporarily to Cypriot vessels. Accession negotiations are opened with FYROM after a compromise with Greece on the name issue (using the term 'Republic of Northern Macedonia' externally, but continuing using the name 'Macedonia' internally)

In the second half of 2012, the Cypriot Presidency gets under heavy diplomatic pressure to make a move towards Turkey and unblocks the opening of negotiations for five additional chapters. Cyprus also drops its veto on signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Kosovo, provided that Serbia is granted the status of EU candidate.

**2013:** The Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the EU and Kosovo is signed. Serbia and Albania get the status of candidate countries.

**2014:** Following a comprehensive agreement on land ownership on the island (involving important financial compensations paid by the EU), Turkey fully recognises the Greek Cypriot authorities and decides to permanently open its ports to Cypriot vessels. Serbia agrees on a territorial exchange with Kosovo allowing it to retain the Serbian populated North of Kosovo. The EU recognises the Republic of Kosovo under its constitutional name. Serbia and Albania are opening accession negotiations.

**2015:** Turkey launches PUDISTEA (Public Diplomacy Surge for Turkish EU Accession) in order to reverse EU public opinion on Turkish EU membership, with a budget of €100m over five years. During the first nine months of the campaign, the level of public support within the EU for the accession of Turkey goes up from 22% to 29%. In parallel, Turkey also sets up the 'TUDIF' (or Turkish Diaspora Integration Funds) shaped on the model of the European Social Funds in order to raise the level of professional qualification of Turkish citizens living the EU.

**2016:** In the second year of PUDISTEA implementation, public support to Turkish accession has climbed to 36%. After a fundamental local government reform and the restructuring of its police force, Bosnia is given the status of a candidate country.

**2017:** The Republic of North Macedonia becomes a member of the EU. One week later, following a landslide referendum, the country reverts to the name of 'Republic of Macedonia'. In the third year of PUDISTEA, public support to Turkish accession has climbed to 41%.

**2018:** After the transfer of former President Lukashenka to The Hague, Belarus expresses its desire to become a member of the EU. In the framework of a EU-Police mission, Kosovo has sent 30 police trainers to Afghanistan. In the fourth year of PUDISTEA, public support to Turkish accession has climbed to 47%.

**2019:** Serbia, Kosovo and Albania become members of the EU (extensive safeguard clauses regarding the rule of law and freedom of movement). Under the Romanian EU Presidency, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus are given the status of 'potential candidate countries'. Turkey provides the bulk of peacekeepers in CSDP missions. In the fifth year of PUDISTEA, EU public support for Turkish accession peaks at 51%.

**2020:** After the closure of the last two chapters of the accession negotiations (freedom of movement and Institutions), Turkey becomes a member of the EU. The Accession treaty provides for a 20-year transition period before full freedom of movement and establishment for Turkish citizens in the EU will be realised. Turkey's number of votes in the Council of Ministers and EP seats will be frozen until 2040.

## Conclusion

This scenario certainly includes some elements of wishful thinking. However, all sides with a stake in the enlargement process must realise that a strong and fresh impetus is needed for setting the process back on track, which implies a degree of fresh and unconventional thinking. Member states have to think about how to reassure their peers that are blocking further negotiations out of concerns for their national political agendas. The (potential) candidates have to increase their awareness that if they fail to address the (perceived) concerns of the wider EU public, most of their objective efforts towards accession may be invalidated.

The role of public administration in this process is crucial since many of the questions related to enlargement (such as the status of Kosovo or the FYROM name issue) are highly politically and emotionally charged. Approaching these issues on a technical, rather than from a political level, might open up new perspectives. The European Coal and Steel community managed to set the agenda for a United Europe on a technical level, which later created a spill-over effect and became manifestly political. In the same way, civil servants can work around the political blockages on the political level and thus set new parameters for political decision-making. Every administration should therefore foster unorthodox and 'out-of-the-box' thinking without political blinders within its ranks. Politicians are naturally wary of confronting hostile public opinions. Getting the right arguments from the administrative level can make their task easier and, hopefully, contribute to getting a blocked political process back on track.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is, in particular, the negative public opinion in France that has prompted Paris to block five negotiation chapters on its own.
- <sup>2</sup> Before the 2004 reforms of the Council's rules of procedures, it was common that every member state made a statement on a given proposal during a Council meeting, regardless how repetitive this statement proved to be. A purely ceremonial *tour de table* could thus easily take 1,5 hours out of such a meeting, reducing the time left for substantial debate. This practice has been abolished under the new rules.
- <sup>3</sup> According to a 2010 Transatlantic Trends poll, only 22% of EU citizens agree that Turkey joining the EU would be a good thing, down from 30% in 2004 <http://trends.gmfus.org/leadership/TTL2011Topline.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> This fact was brilliantly understood by the Polish Tourist Board when they turned the diffuse fears within the EU of a flood of low skilled workers, personified by the 'Polish plumber' and the 'Polish nurse', into a reverse advertising campaign, which contributed to offsetting the poor image of Polish migrants. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4115164.stm>