

★ The European Union's continued enlargement to its east and south-east will depend on a more judicious mix of sticks and carrots, focusing on aid, trade and more extensive engagement with society at large

Managing the EU's growing pains



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The EU's greatest achievement since its foundation has been to provide an anchor for newly democratised countries: for Germany and Italy among its original members; for Greece, Portugal and Spain among later entrants; and, most recently, for the arrivals from central and eastern Europe. The list of aspiring members remains long, despite the growing lack of enthusiasm for further enlargement among the current member states. Yet the EU must continue to look east if it is to demonstrate that the democratic revolutions of recent years have not been in vain, and if it is to help build on the barely healed wounds of the Balkan wars – not to mention secure its own economic interests in the region. Ensuring that its ongoing enlargement strategy won't backfire in terms of public opinion – both within the current member states and in the applicant countries – and finding a solution to the question of 'absorption capacity', will be a crucial challenge for European policymakers in the coming years.

The EU is, up to a point, an open membership club. To join it, a country needs to meet its standards, which are spelled out in the Copenhagen criteria. To be admitted, a country is required to have democratic institutions, the rule of law, protection for human rights and minorities, and a functioning market economy. It also has to transpose all of the existing Community *acquis* into its own legislation. The fact that the prospect of eventual EU membership remains a driving force for many countries in Europe, and has worked wonders in the past – inspiring former Communist regimes to

undergo such far-reaching transformations – means that soft power *can* work. Therefore, the prospect of EU membership is likely to remain one of Europe's key foreign policy instruments, especially when combined with instruments such as diplomacy, trade and aid.

Improving our foreign policy tool kit

But increasing domestic opposition to enlargement, the difficulty of raising or even maintaining its level of economic well-being, and the lack of solutions for how to run a Europe of up to 35 or 40 members, all mean that the EU must reinvent itself as a foreign policy actor with more than one foreign policy tool in its bag. In other words, it must find a way of telling its eastern neighbours, such as Ukraine or Georgia, that while

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membership has not been ruled out in the long term, it is not available now. The EU must offer other incentives to persuade such countries that reform is in the best interest both of them and of the Union.

Currently, the EU is struggling to put this message across. Even much closer to home, in the case of Serbia, Europe lacks a credible policy for encouraging reforms and

democratic forces. Its actions have not heartened, but progressively alienated, the population at large. When it comes to 'troublesome' regimes and situations, the EU's strategy should concentrate on winning the heart and minds of the people, rather than on addressing the policy élites. Enabling the people to travel and learn abroad, through visa facilitation regimes and student exchange programmes, supporting projects that help develop civil society through, for example, training journalists and supporting independent broadcasters, should be top of the EU's agenda. In addition, when government policies are extreme, for example, in the case of Belarus at the moment, European policymakers should encourage change by engaging with more moderate forces within those governments.

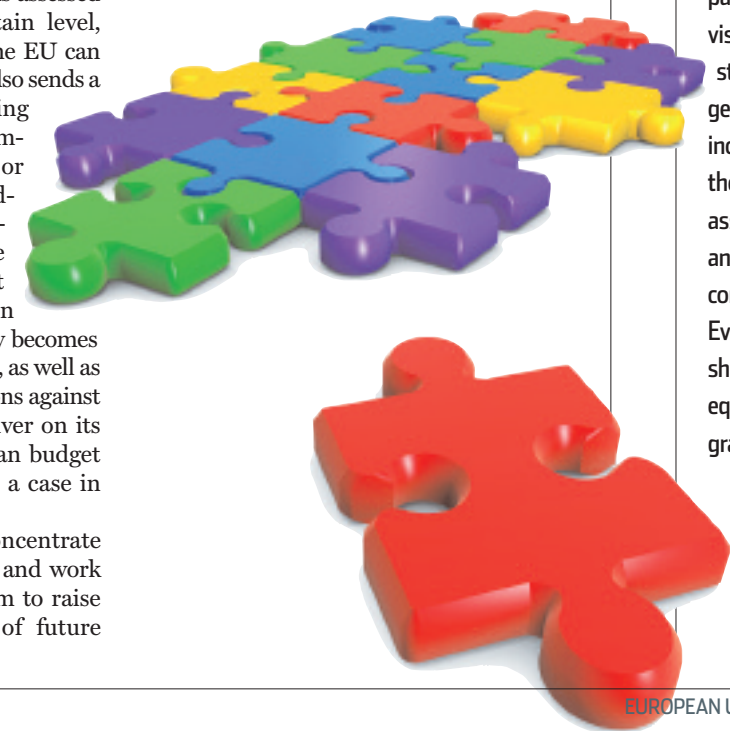
Targeted pressure

On the other hand, when it comes to enlargement, the EU needs to revise its accession process, not only to persuade its domestic audience, but also to ensure that all countries are capable of assuming the responsibilities of membership. The worst way to evaluate an applicant country is to make a decision first and then shape the negotiations around it. To indicate to an applicant country that it can be confident of admission before its performance is assessed or before it has reached a certain level, sacrifices much of the influence the EU can exert on that country. Crucially, it also sends a strong signal to other aspiring members that the criteria for membership can be circumvented or suspended as political considerations will always prevail. Statements of good intentions from the applicant country should also not be relied upon, as we have seen in the case of Cyprus. Once a country becomes a member, the EU lacks the means, as well as the political will, to enforce sanctions against that country should it fail to deliver on its promises. The French and German budget deficits of the past few years are a case in point.

Europe must continue to concentrate on its immediate neighbourhood and work with those countries to help them to raise their standards. The prospect of future

membership should remain an essential foreign policy tool, but not the only one. EU membership needs to be rebranded, so that it is not seen as the last stop of the journey newly democratised countries have embarked on 15 or so years earlier. The goal should be the stability and prosperity of the country in question, whether it is within or outside the EU, with the Union actively contributing towards the process of transformation and the implementation of sustainable political and economic reforms.

In addition, for those countries granted official 'candidate' status, policymakers need to be stricter in applying the membership criteria that have been laid down. This is the only way to avoid further enlargement creating more problems, such as so-called 'enlargement fatigue'. The criteria need to be strictly adhered to, whatever the political outcry, and should not be cast aside in favour of political imperatives. Equally, however, such a rigorous approach needs to be coupled with new incentives sending a signal to the country that it is doing well – just not well enough. Such a signal would make it clear that future membership has not been ruled out. This approach would put additional pressure on aspirant governments to raise their standards, as well as ensure that standards *within* the EU remains high.



ONE IDEA

Use soft power more creatively

In the coming years the EU should strongly concentrate on its immediate neighbourhood – Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans – both to raise the levels of prosperity in those countries, and to ensure its own security. But dangling the membership carrot cannot be its only foreign policy tool. It must reach out to the people, not only to policy élites, by giving them a reason to want to reform and a credible alternative to the current situation. Soft power today must be based on more generous terms of trade and aid packages, relaxation of visa rules (in particular for students), and more generally, on practical incentives to help develop the networks, associations, lobby groups and NGOs which constitute civil society. Eventual membership should not be excluded; equally, it should not be granted automatically.

