Chapter 3
The European Union Enlargement in the Western Balkans:
A Never-Ending Story of High Hopes and High Disappointments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers an analysis of the Western Balkans' thorny path towards joining the European Union (EU). The aim is to identify the key hurdles in the European enlargement in the Western Balkans as well as to suggest ways to deal with these hurdles. The chapter begins with a historical overview and proceeds to a discussion of the most persistent hurdles that still derail the EU enlargement process. After offering recommendations on how to overcome these roadblocks, the chapter provides an outlook. Looking ahead, there is still hope that the European dream of the Western Balkans will eventually turn into reality. The final outcome will be determined to a significant degree by the commitment of the candidate countries, the EU as a whole, but also the future position of the 27 member states. Although the new enlargement methodology can be seen as a step forward, individual member states can still hijack the enlargement process. This might prove to be the Achilles' heel of the entire EU enlargement project.

INTRODUCTION

Enlargement has been on the agenda of the EU since its very first steps. The 1950 Schuman Declaration, which marked the starting point of European integration, envisaged an organisation open for membership to other countries of Europe. The idea of keeping the door open was then expressed in the initial Treaty of Paris and in the subsequent Community and the EU Treaties. Article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) (Lisbon), which provides the legal basis for EU accession, stipulates that any

European country[1] may apply to become a member of the Union if it respects its common values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them[2].

In this context, the EU is currently engaged in an enlargement process towards the Western Balkans[3]. Since the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, the countries of the volatile region of the Western Balkans have repeatedly affirmed their ambition to accede to the EU. However, there is still a long road ahead until this dream turns into reality.

The aim of this chapter is to identify the key hurdles -which can also be viewed as challenges- in the European enlargement in the Western Balkans as well as to suggest ways to deal with these hurdles. In order to meet this aim, the chapter is divided into four parts. In the first part, a historical perspective of the challenges that have defined the EU-Western Balkans relationship in the past decades is presented. In the second part, the discussion focuses on the most persistent hurdles that still derail the EU enlargement process in the region. Part three offers recommendations on how to overcome these roadblocks. The fourth and final part of the chapter builds upon the previous analysis and provides an outlook. Will the Western Balkans' European dream eventually turn into reality?

The significance of the above presented analysis can be understood, if one considers that what is at stake is not only the stability of a fragile region, but also the credibility of the EU to its nearest neighbours.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans dates back to 1999, when the EU introduced a strategic framework for its relations with the countries of the region (the Stabilisation and Association Process- SAP)[4]. The SAP was established with the purpose to support the gradual rapprochement of the Western Balkan countries with the EU (European Parliament, 2021) and was loaded with high expectations.

In 2003, at the Thessaloniki summit, the European Council reaffirmed its determination to fully support the European perspective of the countries of the region[5]. At this time, hopes were high; the enlargement process was perceived as a geostrategic investment in peace, stability and security and an opportunity for the EU to strengthen its role and remain the most visible player in the Western Balkans[6]. In this context, the Western Balkans' European dream received active support from EU member states.

However, in the following years, the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans unfolded at a slow pace. A critical point was the completion of the 2004 enlargement, which brought into the Union ten former communist countries (together with Cyprus and Malta). This was the largest enlargement in the history of the EU- quite often referred to as 'big bang' (e.g. Berger & Moutos, 2004). The 2004 enlargement was followed by the accessions of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and the silent accession of Croatia in 2013. This brought the total number of member states to twenty-eight.

The EU, with the 'big bang' enlargement, had achieved, in a very short period of time, a number of important goals[7]. However, following this extreme expansion of the Union, public opinion started shifting against enlargement. This shift was widely attributed to the so-called enlargement fatigue on the EU side (Devrim & Schulz, 2009; Hay & Smith, 2005; Reka, 2010; Szolucha, 2010; Zängle, 2004)[8] and the parallel accession fatigue on the side of the Western Balkan countries (O'Brennan, 2014). However, the shifting public opinion was also viewed as a result of the shortcomings of Bulgarian and Romanian accessions (Walldén, 2017). Another contributing factor was the fact that the remaining countries on the EU's enlargement agenda (i.e. the Western Balkans and Turkey) were evidently more 'difficult' than the previous ones and less popular in the EU (Ibid)[9].

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