

FUTURE OF THE EU AND THE ENLARGEMENT



European
Movement
Serbia



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About the project

The YouthEU project is supported by the European Commission through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme (CERV) and aims to address the sources of Euroscepticism among youth (high school and first-time voters) in the most Eurosceptic societies in the EU and among the EU candidate countries¹. The project also provides an opportunity for experts and policymakers to gain insight into the attitudes of young people towards the EU and European integration while creating a platform through which the youth can discuss and exchange their views of the EU and learn about the European project.

The YouthEU incorporates both top-down and bottom-up approaches to educating and empowering youth on the EU and their role as European citizens through webinars, workshops and engagement with EU stakeholders in Brussels. The project delivered 40 webinars in 4 countries, which engaged more than 800 participants. Out of those, 15 participants were chosen to take part in each of the national rounds. During the national rounds, students discussed what they consider as priorities for the EU and ultimately, 24 students from 4 participating countries were selected to travel to Brussels for a three-day study trip. Each country brought the outcomes from the national rounds that took place earlier in their capital cities respectively. After the first discussion, they set the main priorities that were formed into 4 pillars (climate, society, democracy, and the future of the EU). These were later on introduced during the general session and presented to MEP and EU delegates. During all of the abovementioned activities, students discussed how they perceive the EU and what they consider the biggest challenges to its prosperous future.

¹ Eurobarometer (2019). <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2255>

Issues raised by the students during the Brussels round of the project

Since the perspective of the EU and its needs and problems, from the perspective of students from Serbia is different from the perspective of students coming from EU member states, their proposals and recommendations had a different angle, framed by national issues and the status of Serbia, a candidate country being stuck somewhere in the middle of the accession process, with a confusing vision of its own strategic orientation. The main focus of the debate among students from Serbia was placed on the future of the enlargement and the environment since the EU is perceived in Serbia as a strong (and sometimes the only) promoter of a clean environment on the continent (environment taken in the broadest sense of the term).

For Serbia, accession is the most important issue when it comes to relations with the EU. It is difficult for students from Serbia, as outsiders, to debate intra-EU issues and the future of the EU. However, they concluded that the integration of the EU itself should deepen, its policies should be more synchronised and a pan-EU approach should be adopted as a joint response to some issues, like abortion and migration. It was evident from the debate that students from Serbia want to see and have more Europe in their lives. Accession to the EU is the only way for that to occur. Students concluded that Serbia should do its part of reforms and homework when it comes to accession criteria and negotiations including imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation. Since Serbia is not aligned with the EU when it comes to sanctions on Russia, they agreed Serbia should introduce sanctions but “in a controlled way”, being against sanctions to sports, and generally against the

„Since Serbia is not aligned with the EU when it comes to sanctions on Russia, they agreed Serbia should introduce sanctions but ,in a controlled way’, being against sanctions to sports, and generally against the 'cancel culture', but supporting sanctions against the Russian Government, the military and industrial complex.“

“cancel culture”, but supporting sanctions against the Russian Government, the military and industrial complex. During this debate, it was clear how much students in Serbia are influenced by false narratives and pro-Russian propaganda spread through Governmentally controlled media in Serbia. On the other side, students concluded that the EU should modify its approach to the enlargement and invest more effort (political and financial) in it since the EU enlargement is perceived by the students to be a win-win deal, beneficial for the EU itself, as well as for candidate countries.

Students put a strong focus on a clean environment, most of all air and water particularly the drinking water and the need for the Government of Serbia to uphold the legislation and control and sanction polluters, something the Government does not do. Students see EU membership as a secure way (and maybe the only way) to have an environment in Serbia protected in the same way as it is in the EU and to have the highest protection standards the EU have.

Future of the EU and the enlargement

Enlargement was identified as highly important for the future of the EU and for Serbia as well.

The Enlargement Policy has, to a great extent, helped the EU become what it is today. What started as a small economic integration of six countries in western Europe became the main driving force on the European continent. However, over time the value and the importance of enlargement got lost. Now it needs to be revived.

The EU should modify its approach to the enlargement and invest more effort in it, since the enlargement is strategically important for the EU itself. It was often emphasised by EU officials that “enlargement remains a strategic, future-oriented geopolitical investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity on the European continent”. The EU holds the key to enlargement since new member states cannot

join against the will of the EU and its member states. The lack of the will and the energy on the EU's part has been visible for far too long now to make the enlargement a credible promise anymore. Serbia was given the EU perspective 19 years ago (some of the participants were not even born then). Serbia has been a candidate country for 13 years and has been conducting accession negotiations for 8 years. So far, it has not reached the point of possible accession in the foreseeable future.

However, it is up to the candidate countries, including Serbia, to demonstrate the willingness and the ability to become EU members and to honour commitments arising out of the membership. So far, they have failed to do so. Serbia has failed to demonstrate its determination to become a fully developed democracy with functioning institutions capable of protecting the liberties and rights of Serbia's citizens. Participants have pinpointed the desire to see a strong rule of law in Serbia in almost all points of the debate, showing that its lack is visible and tangible, affecting their everyday life even at their age. It also affects their vision of their prospects for the future, which does not seem bright.

Enlargement is something that can break the stagnation that Serbia and the region are currently experiencing. It is expected the EU to be an agent of change as it once was for the Central and East European countries joining the EU in 2004/07. The EU should focus on the Western Balkans and show credibility by giving predictability to enlargement while strongly promoting its values through promoting democracy, fighting against corruption, and organised crime and generally working to remedy the lack of rule of law in the region. Serbian and other governments in the region should do their part, while the EU should openly point out all delays and the lack of progress, with a less bureaucratic, better understandable language.

The EU should also eliminate the current nationalisation of the enlargement process by its members and make it truly a European policy, by introducing

qualified majority voting (QMV) during the process. This would speed up the process and demonstrate a willingness on the side of the EU, while not reducing the level of requirements for accession at the same time. Governments of the region should be held responsible for delays in the reform process, which would result in delays in accession and responsible parties should be named (name-and-shame approach).

Many things can be done to improve how the EU functions today. Proposals made by EU citizens, within the scope of the Conference on the Future of Europe have demonstrated what they expect and need from the EU. For the purpose of this policy paper, we shall focus on those issues that we believe could make strategic changes in the substance and in functioning of the EU.

Looking historically, we can say that the development of the EU was driven by two main factors: 1) the needs of its member states and 2) foreign factors influencing the internal processes of the EU, particularly major global crises, and external security challenges.

1. **The needs of member states** have always been and will be the main driver of changes within the EU. This is only logical since the EU was created to respond to the needs of its members for closer cooperation and integration. At the same time, the political choices of EU member states are the main source of problems for the functioning of the EU. Therefore, we can say that everything stems from member states.

When member states needed more economic cooperation to overcome the limitations of national markets and to jointly become global economic players, they created the single market in the 1980s and introduced qualified majority voting (QMV) in this area. That was achieved after 20 years of struggle to overcome issues of unanimity in the decision-making process. In the 1990s, members created the European Union and the Schengen area

with the same goal. The economic crisis of 2008 demonstrated the need for even closer economic integration. This was additionally fuelled by the COVID-19-induced economic crisis, which led to unprecedented changes in the EU budgetary rules and an increase of the EU budget necessary for post-COVID recovery aid.

On the other hand, member states retained unanimity in the decision-making process in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (and Common Security and Defence Policy as its integral part) until this day.

2. **Major global crises and outside security challenges** were one of the engines of EU integration since the rise of the Iron Curtain. The energy crisis of 1970-1980 was the pushing factor for further economic integration through the understanding that only a joint response to the global challenge could make a difference, unlike any national measures. Founding member states tried to establish the European Defence Community in the 1950s' and failed. NATO was giving all the support needed, hence member states did not see a supranational Community as a tool needed in defence policy. EU created the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1993 as part of the Treaty and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 1999 as intergovernmental cooperation among member states². The election of Donald Trump in the USA in 2016 undermined the reliability of NATO as a security guarantor for the EU. The rising threat from Russia on the other side showed the need to do something collectively and autonomously, as the EU. As a result of thinking about its own strategic autonomy, in 2017 the EU launched Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiating deeper defence cooperation on a voluntary basis between EU 25 member states.³

² CSDP was introduced in the Treaty of Nice, signed in 2001, entered into force in 2003

³ <https://www.pesco.europa.eu/about/>

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 demonstrated that a full-scale, industrial war in Europe is back from the history books, and the EU will have to act upon that. This led to a hitherto unprecedented unity of EU member states in the CFSP area. There is a rising understanding that member states will have to act as a united EU in the face of geopolitical adversaries. The possibility of re-election of Donald Trump, or a like-minded politician leading to the loss of the USA security umbrella in December 2024 only exacerbates the need for a more autonomous EU action.

The political and security environment of the EU has changed rapidly in the last 10-15 years. The EU is facing today's challenges which were unthinkable in the early 2000's. The future of the EU depends on the capability to respond to these challenges and to do it rapidly. Reform of major areas of the EU actions is needed to respond both to the needs of members and to the changes in the political surrounding. In the context of this paper, three areas can be identified as being in the need of EU reforms:

1. Decision-making process,
2. Defence and energy security, and
3. Enlargement.

1. Decision-making process

The EU has become a global economic player thanks to the development of the single market. That would have been impossible without the introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) in this area. Areas, where the EU has made the biggest success, are areas where QMV is introduced, namely the internal market of the EU and to a large extent the area of freedom, justice, and security.

The largest failure to act as a global, and sometimes even as a regional player, is in the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy. One of the major obstacles is the unanimity voting rule, where any EU member state can block the EU action. While for the EU it is easy to act globally and match economically the USA and China, the situation is the polar opposite when it comes to the realpolitik of international relations. If the EU aspires to become a geopolitical actor, as President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen declared in the 2019 inaugural speech, it will have to start acting like one. For that, the “communitarisation”⁴ of CFSP/CSDP, namely through invoking QMV, must be achieved. Even though the EU has shown the highest level of unity (unexpectedly, by many observers) when it comes to responding to the Russian attack on Ukraine, the difficult negotiations among member states would be much more efficient without the veto power. This does not mean that national interests and positions should be neglected, but with QMV the member states would know that they must compromise or could be outvoted. Under these circumstances, compromise is much easier to reach.

2. Defence and energy security – EU as a global player

Ever since 1949, NATO has been a security umbrella of Western Europe and the EU. One term in office of Donald Trump showed the unreliability of that premise. For a long time, the EU operated on assumptions that in today’s world, a hard security threat is not possible in Europe, but that soft security threats, like illegal immigration, terrorism and organised crime are the main security challenges of the EU. Additionally, for decades the development of the EU economy was based on cheap and easily accessible gas from Russia. The Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, has shown that this premise was wrong as well; “cheap” Russian

⁴ A policy becoming more communitarian, meaning being run in a way the European Community was run <http://en.euabc.com/word/994>

gas comes with a high (political) price and its accessibility is questionable. The COVID-19 pandemic also demonstrated how fragile global trade and supply chains are.

All this must be reflected in the future actions and attitudes of the EU.

Even though EU member states spend significant amounts of funds for defence purposes, fragmentation of spending, duplication and poor coordination prevent the EU from becoming a significant political and military factor. In 2020 (after the UK left the EU), the EU Member States' general government expenditure on defence amounted to €198 billion.⁵ This is 3 times more than what Russia spent in 2020⁶ and represents 90% of the 2020 military budget of China⁷. Yet, the EU is not considered to be a military power as such, unlike Russia and China, which aspire to global influence and military presence.

With the security changes brought by the Trump administration, the EU should start developing its capacities necessary for autonomous defence. Eastern members of the EU are facing a legitimate threat from Russia now and the EU should be able to implement in practice article 42.7 of the TEU in case NATO's commitment to Article 5 is dubious. This is not so today.

The EU should also develop its energy policy with the ultimate goal of becoming less dependent on outside sources of energy. Developing its own – sustainable – energy capacities has become of paramount importance. For the last 30 years, access to energy was not scarce. This has allowed the EU in the last years to shift its focus from just having enough energy to moving towards sustainability and making the EU green. Providing energy security and the EU's Green agenda has become ever more synchronised and not conflicting policies.

⁵ <https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2021/12/06/eda-finds-record-european-defence-spending-in-2020-with-slump-in-collaborative-expenditure>

⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?locations=RU>

⁷ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?locations=CN>

The environment must remain an essential part of the energy transition of the EU and transition to renewable energy can be the EU's exit strategy for solving its energy dependence. Existing nuclear energy capacities should be kept, having in mind today's circumstances as a temporary solution, until new renewable and more affordable capacities to replace them are built. Energy security of the EU that would lead to its strategic independence should be the main goal, as the current issue of denying the gas supply by Russia demonstrates. On the other hand, one must be careful that one dependency is not replaced by another one, moving from Russian gas to liquified natural gas from the USA. Therefore, providing security of energy supply should be a priority.

Both security changes should aim for reaching the ultimate goal of becoming self-reliant if not self-sufficient. However, the EU must be aware of a possibility that the process of building self-reliance can end up in building a confined "fortress Europe." This must be avoided at all costs, since that would go against all values defined in EU treaties and the very reason the EU was established in the first place. An open EU is based on its values of human dignity, democracy, rule of law, promotion of freedom, free trade, tolerance, justice, and solidarity. The EU should continue to promote these values in the global arena. That cannot be done if "fortress Europe" emerges as a result of building self-reliant capabilities.

3. Enlargement and the rule of law - closing the gap in the continent

The "Communitarisation" of major EU policies, namely through invoking QMV, is a change that must occur if the EU wants to preserve its agility and capability of a quick response in an ever faster-changing world. One policy that made the EU an important player, and not just a rich economic integration in Western Europe, is the Enlargement policy. It is derived from Foreign Policy and if QMV is invoked in Foreign Policy, the Enlargement Policy must follow.

Once frequently called “the most successful EU policy” representing the most effective EU foreign policy instrument, over the last 15 years, the enlargement has been given a bad name, without fault of its own. It has become almost a swear word in Brussels and some capitals that even EU documents dedicated to enlargement sometimes did not dare to mention it. If the EU wants to close the backdoors for interference from third parties, it must improve the enlargement process and extend the QMV to enlargement as well. Article 49 of the TEU defines that unanimity is needed at the opening of accession negotiations and at the end for ratification of the accession treaty. **These requirements should remain**, and member states should have full control of the acceptance of new member states. However, requiring unanimity at every step of the process opened the door for the nationalisation of the policy by member states. In the case of Serbia and Montenegro, every EU member had 76 opportunities to unilaterally stop the process of accession. The new methodology, adopted in 2020, slightly reduces this possibility. However, in any case, a single member state can block any candidate country, at any moment, for any reason. With the entry into the process of new candidate countries Ukraine and Moldova, not blocking enlargement for national reasons, unrelated to the EU and the EU law is *conditio sine qua non* for playing a geopolitical game against Russia.

Speeding up and finishing the enlargement thus is at the core of the EU’s strategic and security interests. A new, more agile, and energetic EU approach to enlargement is needed and new members should join the EU by the end of this decade, almost two decades after the opening of accession with Montenegro (2012) and Serbia (2014).

Enlargement has always been a security issue for the EU, but that is now seemingly forgotten. After 24 February 2022, it has become evident more than ever. Taking the Balkans into the EU is of great importance for the EU to increase its own security from third-party’s interference and show the credibility of enlargement

prospects to all candidate countries (including Ukraine and Moldova). It will also demonstrate its capability of playing in the global geopolitical arena. The 24 February 2022 demonstrated that former categories of spheres of influence and other Cold War concepts are re-emerging. Enlargement is arguably the best tool for the EU to show that it is capable of defining and defending its own sphere of influence.

In his speech at the 2022 annual EU Ambassadors conference, HR Josep Borell said: *“The world is not purely bipolar. We have multiple players and poles, each one looking for their interests and values. – EU must defend and project its own values at least with countries that share them and are in Europe.”*⁸

To be able to defend and project its values the EU must first uphold them within the EU. This applies primarily to the rule of law and democracy. For far too long, some EU member states (e.g., Hungary and Poland) have diluted and downgraded these two values. To remedy this situation inside the EU, actions (e.g., withholding funds from the EU budget, suspending voting rights) against member states breaching EU rules and values must become a regular occurrence.

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The internal EU situation had a spill-over effect on enlargement countries. WB leadership, not being keen on rule of law or truly committed to EU values, copied certain behaviours of member states which downgraded the democracy and the rule of law in the EU itself and managed to move around EU accession criteria by using different positions of different EU member states on the topic. Similarities of patterns of

Government activities for example in Hungary, Serbia and North Macedonia are

⁸https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell_en

more than coincidental. An example of this spillover is the fact that the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski was granted asylum in Hungary when faced with charges of corruption in North Macedonia⁹. At the same time, the job of the EU Commissioner for Enlargement Mr Oliver Varhely, from Hungary¹⁰, is to promote the EU values such as the rule of law and accountability of public officials, during accession negotiations with North Macedonia. Commissioner Varhely himself has been mentioned several times in relation to diluting the EU standards on rule of law and democracy¹¹ while the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) of the European Parliament demanded in the (still) proposal of the Resolution on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2022 *“an investigation into the conduct of enlargement Commissioner Mr. Várhely, over reports he deliberately undermines the centrality of democracy and rule-of-law reforms in accession countries.”*¹²

Failure of the EU to promote these values in the enlargement process is evident when looking back at the situation in the Western Balkans 10-15 years ago, when countries were more democratic than they are today while the rule of law was on a rising trend back then, unlike today.

To be able to defend and project its values, the EU should demonstrate that there will not be any negotiations about the fundamental values as defined by the TEU, both within the EU and with candidates. Assessing candidates against EU

⁹<https://hungarytoday.hu/north-macedonias-former-pm-gruevski-who-fled-to-hungary-sentenced-to-7-years/>

¹⁰ Mr. Varhely was a former ambassador of Hungary to the EU until 2019 when he was appointed the Commissioner for Enlargement.

¹¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/oliver-varhelyi-eu-commissioner-enlargement-western-balkans-serbia-human-rights-democracy-rule-of-law/>

¹² Proposal of the Resolution on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2022, amendments 424 (plenary debate and voting scheduled for 23. January 2023) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/AFET-AM-737377_EN.pdf <https://sot.com.al/english/aktualitet/parlamenti-europian-prietet-te-nise-hetim-per-oliver-varhelyi-zbardhet-i553317>

fundamental values must again become the first and top priority for the European Commission. This has been neglected for years now. Strong EU scrutiny and monitoring mechanisms installed before the accession can speed up the process. Turning a blind eye on the evident lack of the rule of law for the sake of fragile regional stability will not bring anything good to the WB or the EU and is in fact only destabilising the WB region.

Conclusions

We are living in an ever-changing world. A new world is emerging, and the world based on democracy, liberalism and rule of law is being challenged. The EU must adapt itself to the new reality and old ways of doing things must be accommodated to a new environment, if fundamental values are to be defended. This means that the EU must become more agile and determined in fulfilling its goals.

As it was always emphasised, “crises are great unifiers.” In the time of this crisis, the EU must further unite or will not be able to rise to the challenge. Changes must lead to the EU getting out of its comfort zone, the same way the EU went out of its decades-old budget rules and increased the budget to deal with COVID-19. Now the EU must change its decision-making rules and introduce qualified majority voting in Common Foreign and Security Policy including Common Security and Defence Policy, as its integral part, and in the Enlargement Policy.

EU member states must also start jointly investing in the EU's own defence and military capabilities based on its own resources. The EU must start building its energy self-reliance while moving towards the Green Agenda and being careful that one dependency is not replaced by another one, moving from Russian gas to USA's liquified natural gas. Existing nuclear energy capacities should be kept, having in mind today's circumstances as a temporary solution, until new renewable and more affordable capacities to replace them are built.

Speeding up and finishing the enlargement is at the core of the EU's strategic, future-oriented geopolitical investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity on the European continent. A new more agile and energetic approach to enlargement is needed and new members should enter the EU by the end of this decade.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. The qualified majority voting (QMV) must be invoked in the Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy, as its integral part, and in the Enlargement policy.
2. The EU must speed up the building of its military and defence capacities within PESCO to support the implementation of article 42.7 of the Treaty on EU.
3. The EU should put all its efforts into reaching energy self-reliance.
4. Enlargement should be placed at the core of the EU activities for being in the EUs' strategic and security best interest to include countries in the enlargement process (WB and Eastern Europe) and finalise the process of unification of the European continent.
5. The defence and promotion of EU values, primarily democracy and the rule of law should be a fundamental requirement for all member states and at the heart of the enlargement process.

For more information about the YouthEU project and organisations involved in its implementation, please visit youtheu.eu.



EuropaNova

