

**By PhD Peter Pál Kránitz**

**The Hungarian Presidency of the European Council (July-December 2024) considers enlargement as one of the most successful policies of the EU and strives for consistent and merit-based process of accession. It is set to become one of the most pro-enlargement presidencies in the history of the EU, as it aims to close old and open new negotiating chapters with candidate states on the Western Balkans. It will prioritize established economic and political criteria for accession rather than nursing larger member states' own foreign political goals.**

### **Introduction**

Hungary took over the Presidency of the European Council in July 2024 and vowed to follow a consistent and merit-based enlargement policy. Accelerating candidate states' accession - in line with the revised methodology of 2020 set forth by Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, based on the reports of the European Commission, while taking into account the European Union's capacity to absorb new members - has been put forth as one of the top priorities of the Hungarian Presidency<sup>[1]</sup>.

The Hungarian government has been an outspoken advocate for enlargement for more than a decade and considers it one of the most successful policies of the EU. It believes it is essential to keep enlargement balanced and credible in order to shake up, or even maintain the policy's momentum. The long-delayed integration of the Western Balkans promises not only geopolitical benefits for the EU, but great economic potentials too, while failing to do so may result in unforeseen geopolitical consequences. Accession of the Associated Trio - Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia - would also significantly strengthen the European bloc, however, it is hampered by serious challenges that need to be faced sincerely and thoroughly.

### **The geopolitics of enlargement - challenges and possibilities**

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Europe rediscovered geopolitics. Enlargement has been put forth by European decision makers as a key foreign policy tool to tackle the challenges of the "New Cold War" and the overall global geopolitical transformation, to establish a secure Eastern neighbourhood. It granted Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia candidate status in 2022 and 2023<sup>[2]</sup>. Although Hungary is in full alignment with this policy and supports every candidate state's right for restoring their territorial integrity and sovereignty, it believes that geopolitics should not overwrite existing criteria for accession as it compromises the credibility of the EU. The

Cyprus model may provide legal frameworks for accession of candidates with contested territories[3], however, accession of a country that is fighting a full-scale war on its territory means importing the conflict to the economic-political bloc and is therefore undesirable. Although the EU is not a military alliance, the Treaty of Lisbon includes a mutual defence clause, providing that if “a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power”, which poses undeniable security threats with regards to the swift accession of Ukraine, a country invaded and engaged in a deadly war[4]. Established and secured frameworks for peaceful conflict management - such as the Geneva International Discussions or the OSCE Mission to Moldova - should therefore be set as a criterion for accession talks, during which Copenhagen conditions should enjoy utmost priority. Candidate states' fight against corruption and striving for rule of law, human and minority rights are considered by the Hungarian Presidency as other key premises for meaningful accession talks.

The recent momentum in EU-enlargement is considered by many a mere showcase of geopolitical aspirations rather than a consistent and reliable foreign policy, which is especially contentious from the standpoint of the EU's partners on the Western Balkans. Never has there been such a great delay in a successful round of enlargement as since Croatia's accession in 2013. Countries such as Serbia, Montenegro, or Albania were promised membership over a decade ago, but accession talks have since been hampered by a series of vetoes from larger EU member states like France or the Netherlands who are in constant debates over the need for the infamous reform of the union, the transition to a qualified majority voting (QMV) system as a precondition for further enlargement. The same member states who are the loudest advocates for Ukraine's swift accession and for more assertive European foreign politics are the ones that have for years delayed accession of reliable candidates. The Western Balkans is the region where the EU could achieve immediate results and make strong geopolitical statements, unlike the one made by Charles Michel in Bled in 2023 on the timetable for Western Balkans accession.[5] In this turbulent international environment, without any sustainable progress in accession talks, 2030 seems like a weak prospect. The Hungarian EU Presidency believes it is time to shake up EU enlargement on the Western Balkans.

The candidate state with probably the most significant geopolitical influence on the security architecture of the European continent, with the largest military force of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on the Eastern hemisphere, an emerging great power, Türkiye, has been a candidate for full membership for over a quarter of a century and has never been further away from accession than it is today. Instead, Ankara is more and more close to

applying for a membership in BRICS, which, on the long run, could potentially have catastrophic consequences for European security. The Hungarian government considers the European disassociation with Türkiye a great geopolitical mistake, therefore, the Hungarian EU Presidency is set to prioritize steps towards the reestablishment of the integrational procedure - the EU-Türkiye Association Council is expected to meet again during Hungary's presidency -, to upgrade and expand the customs union between Türkiye and the EU, and to advance visa liberalization for Turkish citizens[6].

### **Escaping the trap of inconsistent and meritless enlargement**

EU's enlargement today suffers from a deficit in consistency and credibility. The fact that Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status at a record pace, just four months after their application for membership, and the decision to open accession talks was made less than 18 months later, while Northern Macedonia had to wait 17 years for such a decision, shows that swift accession was a matter of political will all along. However, even in the light of Russia's aggression and the sudden momentum of European geopolitics, enlargement has been taken hostage by certain member states' own foreign political interests and, in some cases, corrupted into direct interference in candidate states' domestic affairs, such as the freezing of Georgia's EU accession by Germany on accounts of alleged anti-democratic policies[7]. The Hungarian government considers it a mistake, and views the much debated Georgian legislation on "transparency of foreign influence" not as anti-democratic, but on the contrary, as democratic, as it seeks to ensure transparency in the civil sector, which is a fundamental democratic and European value[8]. The real reason behind recent Western attacks on the Georgian government is that it refuses to unconditionally and fully align with the US demand of decoupling and de-risking, and refuses to yield to the reformation of power blocs within the international arena as it understands that a New Cold War could have catastrophic consequences for a country on the frontiers of continents, world religions, and great powers.

On the other hand, the EU has turned a blind eye to the erosion of democracy and the rule of law in Ukraine despite all the warnings of civil society and the opposition[9]. The Zelenskiy administration has banned political parties - along ten others, the largest opposition party[10] -, postponed elections despite the expiry of the president's term[11], blatantly represses freedom of speech (banning opposition TV channels[12], forcefully drafting journalists critical to authorities and mounting political pressure on editorials[13], etc.), banned the Ukrainian Orthodox Church for alleged ties to Moscow[14], banned Russian and Belorussian music and books in Ukraine[15], permitted the destruction of dozens of statues depicting Russian poet Alexander Pushkin and other cultural memory sites[16], and the list goes on. Not to mention the raging corruption in the country and the

fact that its economy is in ruins - without foreign support, government debt would increase to 100% of the GDP[17]. Yet, if an EU member state's government raises its concerns and points out the hypocrisy of the EU, it is labelled as anti-European and pro-Russian[18].

Inconsistent and meritless practices of the EU in handling enlargement is destroying its credibility. Scepticism towards the EU is growing, most strikingly among the youth in the Western Balkans countries[19]. While EU membership becomes more distant in the eyes of Western Balkans decision makers and the public, the influence of external actors such as China, Türkiye or the Gulf States is growing.

## Conclusions

Hungary is against QMV reforms in the EU. Member states must realise that this debate is bottomless and should not be set as precondition to enlargement. The Hungarian Presidency of the European Council is set to become one of the most pre-enlargement presidencies. It strives to open new accession chapters with Serbia and to close as many as possible with Montenegro, and to make all possible preparations for the second intergovernmental conference in Albania and North Macedonia. It is an advocate for the start of genuine negotiation with Bosnia and Herzegovina and calls for the withdrawal of German veto on starting accession talks with Georgia too. The Hungarian Presidency will attempt to deconstruct artificially created obstacles of accession talks and fight the hypocrisy and double standards that took enlargement hostage. Copenhagen criteria should be prioritized over geopolitics and member states' own foreign policy agendas, otherwise enlargement will fail, and the European family will further polarize.

Although current Hungarian and Polish governments disagree on many aspects of enlargement, those mentioned above in particular, the two countries share most of their geopolitical risks and needs and therefore could easily find common grounds to shape the future of our shared family of nations in Europe. Since there is minimal dialogue on a governmental level, it is up to academia and the civil society to engage in a constructive dialogue on how to survive the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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