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*12 July 2010*

### **Addressing the EU enlargement crisis**

This was supposed to be the moment of European boldness. Finally, the Lisbon Treaty is in force. A European External Action Service is being set up. And yet some big member states have decided to risk the credibility of the most successful European foreign policy so far: enlargement.

Somehow, they imply, the problems of bad loans and real estate bubbles, the difficulty of finding a consensus and the lack of enthusiasm about the European project can be blamed on enlargement. Therefore the convenient solution to current anxieties about Europe is to break the promise the EU gave to candidate and potential candidate states in South East Europe almost ten years ago at the Zagreb summit. This is the moment for new members of the EU to make their voice heard. Leaders in Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw – coming together on 20 July at the Visegrad Group summit in Budapest to discuss matters of common interest – know that enlargement is an effective tool for EU leverage as long as the promise is real and credible, and as long as conditionality is fair. They also know that enlargement makes the EU stronger and that none of the big problems the EU faces today is a result of enlargement.

The problem is that recently many self-declared “friends of enlargement” add additional obstacles. Spain, Greece, Romania and Slovakia belong to the group of 5 that refuse to recognise Kosovo as an independent state, undermining any prospect for accession of Kosovo and making it extremely difficult for Serbia as well. Macedonia’s start of membership negotiations is blocked by Greece over the latter’s objections to Macedonia’s constitutional name. The UK, another enlargement-friendly country, opposes the closure of the international protectorate in Bosnia, pushing Bosnia’s prospects of opening accession talks into the future. Slovenia’s effectiveness as a staunch supporter of enlargement has been undermined by its dispute with Croatia.

EU enlargement sceptics can hide behind these disagreements and unresolved bilateral conflicts. This matters. The EU’s enlargement policy has always needed member states willing to be effective advocates. The V-4 and the forthcoming Hungarian and Polish EU presidencies in 2011 could provide new momentum.

First, the enlargement process is in fact advancing and has now reached a critical point. Western Balkan countries have applied for membership and are awaiting an answer when talks might begin. A recent ECFR paper by Heather Grabbe, Gerald Knaus and Daniel Korski

suggests that the European Commission should be tasked with starting “screening” with all Western Balkan countries and preparing “opinions” on their preparedness for membership. By the end of 2011 all countries should become candidates. The most advanced could start negotiations in 2012. This would re-establish trust in the EU, provide incentives for reform, enhance competition between the individual states and make it easier for civil society to hold their governments accountable. Responding constructively is the best way to safeguard against any return to the destructive nationalism of the 1990s.

Second, populist fears of a looming invasion by a large number of unprepared new member states must be exposed for what they are: myths. Countries like Macedonia or Serbia can expect to join the EU earliest ten years from now; and this is the best-case scenario! However, some EU member states still talk about Balkan enlargement as around the corner.

Third, no supporter of Balkan enlargement advocates weakening EU conditionality. The accession process has become even more demanding since the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. There are many more requirements and closer scrutiny of the implementation of EU standards. This helps ensure that institutional reforms proceed in the Balkans.

Forth, more emphasis must be put on resolving bilateral issues. Slovakia’s new leadership could start by changing the country’s position on Kosovo. [A good opportunity would be after the forth-coming ICJ ruling on Kosovo’s independence declaration.]

It is time for the European project to be revived based on the experience of its new members. The EU Presidencies of Hungary and Poland in 2011 provide an opportunity that must not be missed.

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