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DEFINING THE LIMITS OF EU EASTERN ENLARGEMENT: FATIGUE,
VALUES OR 'ABSORPTION CAPACITY'?

Abstract

After the successful completion of the 2004/07 'mega enlargement', the spread of peace, democracy and prosperity on the European continent via EU enlargement seems to be speedily approaching its limits. Despite more interested candidates and initially promising socio-economic development trends among both the new and old EU members, only a few small countries from the Western Balkans have any real chance of joining the EU in the near future.

Looking at the main causes of the emergence of enlargement fatigue in the 'old' EU member states and its negative impacts on the continuation of EU eastern enlargement after 2004/07, this paper argues that the limits of EU eastern enlargement are set by both prevailing political attitudes founded on various grounds in the leading EU member states and by the rationally defined objective capacity of the EU's institutions to absorb the new member states.

Keywords: *EU Eastern enlargement, enlargement fatigue, objective limits, rational and other explanations, absorption capacity of EU institutions*

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The positive impact of the eastern enlargement of the European Union for the success of post-communist political and economic transition is a historical fact that has been recognised in a large body of literature for some time (Grabbe, 2006; Pridham, 2005; Vachudova, 2005). Twenty years after the collapse of East European communism, it is obvious that the transition from communist dictatorship to multi-party democracy and from a command economy to a market economy has been successful almost exclusively in those ex-communist countries which were able to link their political and socio-economic reforms to association with the EU and the accession process from the very beginning of their post-communist development. While eight East Central European and Baltic states succeeded in solidly building and consolidating the functioning of institutions of multi-party democracy and the market economy during the 1990s and early 2000s and were therefore awarded with European Union membership as of 1 May 2004, among the other post-communist European states only three "late transitionists" from South-Eastern Europe were able to similarly follow this successful path. Bulgaria and Romania were admitted to the EU in 2007 and together with Croatia, whose accession into the EU in 2013 has been recently confirmed by the decisions of the European Council (European Council, 2011), they continue to speedily introduce market reforms with some problems in consolidating the institutions of democracy, especially regarding the spread of corruption and the involvement of organised crime in the functioning of government institutions. By contrast, the remaining countries of the so-called "Western Balkans" which all have signed associated treaties with the EU¹ and (with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina) have recently submitted their application for EU membership are either still waiting to open accession negotiations (as is the case with FYR Macedonia and Montenegro) or even to get full candidate status (Table 2); the rest are officially recognised only as 'potential candidates'. The future of non-Baltic post-Soviet states, none of

¹ The so-called Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA), which were basically similar to Europe Agreements on primarily asymmetrical economic/trade concessions signed with the countries of the 2004/2007 Enlargement in the early 1990s, but contained additional requirements regarding the stabilisation, reconciliation and mutual cooperation among the post-Yugoslav states in accordance with the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), which the EU launched after the end of civil wars in Croatia and B-H and the signing of the Dayton Peace Accord in 1995.

which have ever been seriously considered for getting the status of an associated (even less so an accession) country to the EU looks even gloomier. They have not only been significantly less successful in post-communist political and economic transition than any of their western ex-communist counterparts, but they started to reverse the direction of change especially regarding political (anti-)reform and increased authoritarianism over the last several years.

Such a positive correlation between eastern enlargement of the European Union and success in post-communist reform has also been largely beneficial for the 'old' EU member states and their people. Despite the unquestionable importance of some 'non-materialist' motives, especially highlighted in constructivist and functionalist explanations of the factors that were behind the EU's eastern enlargement (Sedelmeier, 2005; Schimmelfennig et al. 2006; Schimmelfennig, 2001 and 2002) a strong rationalist component has always been in the foreground of the very idea of European integration and EU enlargement policy (Litner, 1999; Nungent, 2004). Inviting and allowing their former opponents from the communist east to 'join the club' after completing the required accession criteria, Western Europeans hoped to achieve some economic gains but even more importantly extend and secure a 'zone of peace and political stability' further from their borders in the east (Zielonka 2006, Petrovic, 2004). The historical evidence shows that the process of EU eastern enlargement thus far has almost completely met the expectations of both sides of the former Iron Curtain.

However, recent developments indicate that the spread of peace, democracy and prosperity on the European continent via EU enlargement is speedily approaching its limits, which do not coincide with the geographical borders of Europe and the proposition of the Treaty of Rome (which has not been amended by subsequent treaties) that "any European state may apply to become a member of Community [i.e. Union]"². The following discussion in the first section of this paper will show how the politically and institutionally set limits of the EU's *absorption capacity* (for new members) have in recent years effectively defined the limits of EU enlargement to the east. In the second section the scope and applicability of the two dominant approaches are examined in defining the *objective* limits to EU enlargement, which are mostly identical to the hardly measurable capacity of the EU institutions and

² The Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, Rome 1957, art. 237.

policies to function well after any new enlargement(s). Section three concludes that even if the political conditions and collective will were very different than they are today to allow the future EU borders to stretch to the geographical end of Europe at the Urals, the objective limits to enlargement would hardly allow for such an expansion.

1. THE EMERGENCE OF *ENLARGEMENT FATIGUE* AND ITS FIRST IMPLICATIONS

Sometime between the completion of the 2004 enlargement and the admission of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, especially after the failed referenda on the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands in May and June 2005 and the EU Council's decision to open negotiations for accession with Turkey in October 2005, the wider intellectual public, some political circles and media in the old EU member states started to question the rationale for rapid EU enlargement (from 15 members before 2004 to 27 in 2007) and began to loudly oppose any further EU enlargement to the east (Phinnemore, 2006). Grounding their fears partly in some 'traditional' Western media stereotypes (Todorova, 1997; Hatzopoulos, 2003) and structural theories on deep and longstanding socio-political, economic, cultural and even 'civilisational' differences between the European West and East (Huntington, 1993/1996) and partly on the legitimate question of whether the EU institutions will be able to continue to effectively function with such a rapid increase of its membership rather than in the post-2004 enlargement development trends, they argued that for the sake of its future progress and internal stability the EU simply could not afford the accession of any more 'weak' ex-communist states. Fairly 'Westernised' and economically-advanced Croatia is considered to be the 'only possible exception' in this regard (Seroka, 2008).

Finding themselves between such pressures and the uncertainty of waiting for the adoption of its new constitutional treaty which will enable "its institutions and decision-making processes [to] remain effective...in a Union of more than 27 Member States" (EU Commission 2006, 20-21) EU (member states') leaders decided to discourage any further applications for accession, despite the generally positive and promising development trends among both the new and old EU members from 2004 until the eruption of the world economic crisis in 2008 (Table 1). The European Council meeting of June 2006 requested the EU Commission re-assess the importance of the EU's so-called

absorption capacity as an accession criterion³ and submit a detailed report (Petrovic, 2009, Emerson et al, 2006). In its response, the Commission had formulated a more rigorous tool for negotiating the adoption and implementation of *acquis* chapters by the end of the year in order to "ensur[e] that the candidate countries are ready to take on the obligations of membership when they join by fulfilling the rigorous conditions set" and hence become more *easily absorbable* for the EU (EU Commission 2006, 15). This new (i.e. tougher) approach to the negotiations together with the already increased number of chapters for negotiations (now 35 instead of the 31 for the 12 countries of the 2004/07 enlargement) has affected not only Croatia and Turkey, the only two candidates who currently have opened negotiations for accession with the EU, but also all potential EU candidates from the Western Balkans which are still waiting to open their negotiations.

While Croatia and Turkey have now (until mid 2011) had longer accession negotiation talks with the EU (since October 2005) than any accessory state of the 2004 and 2007 enlargement⁴, the insistence on a tougher pre-accession approach in recent years has further slowed down an already delayed progress in EU accession for the remaining 'late post-communist reformers' from the Western Balkans. Although their 'European perspective' and 'EU future' were promised by the EU on several occasions almost a decade ago in the early 2000s - most notably by the adoption of the "Thessaloniki Agenda" of June 2003⁵ - none of the latter, including FYR Macedonia, which has been an officially recognised EU membership candidate already for six years (since December 2005), has yet set a date for opening accession negotiations with the EU. Moreover, following the experience of Croatia's progress in association and accession, their own completed steps in this regard thus far (see Table 2) and the objectively required time for the completion of other necessary steps in the EU accession process (Grabbe, 2010), only Macedonia (if it gets Greece's approval regarding its country name) and possibly

³ Although it was included in the original Copenhagen accession criteria, this criterion did not play any significant role in the timing of the 2004 and 2007 enlargement processes.

⁴ The accessory states who joined the EU in 2004 negotiated their accession from 1998 (Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia only from 2000) to December 2002, while Bulgaria and Romania did this during the period 2000-2004.

⁵ EU General Affairs and External Relations Council, 2003. For more details see also Petrovic 2009 and Pipan 2004.

Montenegro of the remaining Western Balkan states can hope to open accession negotiations before 2013.

Table 1

Average annual real GDP growth and unemployment rates

	2003		2005		2006		2007		2008	
	GDP	Unm	GDP	Unm	GDP	Unm	GDP	Unm	GDP	Unm
Germany	-0.2	8.3	0.8	10.7	3.2	9.8	2.5	8.4	1.3	7.3
France	1.1	9.0	1.9	9.3	2.2	9.2	2.4	8.4	0.2	7.8
Italy	0.0	8.4	0.7	7.7	2.0	6.8	1.6	6.1	-1.3	6.7
UK	2.8	5.0	2.2	4.8	2.9	5.4	2.6	5.3	0.5	5.6
Netherlands	0.3	3.7	2.0	4.7	3.4	3.9	3.6	3.2	2.0	2.8
EU-15	0.8	8.6	1.7	8.9	3.0	8.3	2.7	7.4	0.5	7.1
Czech Rep.	3.6	7.8	6.3	7.9	6.8	7.2	6.1	5.3	2.5	4.4
Hungary	4.3	5.9	3.5	7.2	4.0	7.5	1.0	7.4	0.6	7.8
Poland	3.9	19.7	3.6	17.8	6.2	13.9	6.8	9.6	5.0	7.1
Slovakia	4.8	17.6	6.7	16.3	8.5	13.4	10.6	11.1	6.2	9.5
Slovenia	2.8	6.7	4.5	6.5	5.8	6.0	6.8	4.9	3.5	4.4
Estonia	7.6	10.0	9.4	7.9	10.0	5.9	7.2	4.7	1.3	5.5
Latvia	7.2	10.5	10.6	8.9	12.2	6.8	10.0	6.0	-4.2	7.5
Lithuania	10.2	12.5	7.8	8.3	7.8	5.6	9.8	4.3	2.8	5.8
Bulgaria	5.0	13.7	6.2	10.1	6.3	9.0	6.2	6.9	6.0	5.6
Romania	5.2	7.0	4.2	7.2	7.9	7.3	6.3	6.4	7.3	4.4
Croatia	5.0	14.2	4.2	12.7	4.7	11.2	5.5	9.6	2.4	8.4
Turkey	5.3	-	8.4	9.2	6.9	8.7	4.7	8.8	0.9	9.7
Macedonia	2.8	-	4.1	-	4.0	-	5.9	-	4.9	-

Source: Eurostat, 2010.

Although it cannot be considered as the most important or crucial factor, the recent adoption of a tougher EU approach to accession negotiations was

definitely not neutral in tracing the very slow progress of these states in their accession to the EU and consequently the recent deceleration of their progress in post-communist reform (especially democratisation, see Table 2). In fact, in addition to an initially established special set of pre-accession conditions related to overcoming the negative consequences of the 1990s wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo⁶, it was another element of EU conditionality imposed on the current candidates (and potential candidates) for EU membership from the Western Balkans which their ex-communist counterparts from Central Europe, the Baltics and the 'Eastern Balkans' did not need to fulfil. Taking this into consideration, together with their later start with post-communist reform and the closely related issue of their problematic internal political stability (which negatively and most directly impacts on the consolidation of the domestic institutions of democracy)⁷, the promised 'EU future' of the Western Balkan states several years ago now looks farther away than ever before. Nevertheless, the accession of all the Western Balkan states into the EU sooner or later still seems 'hardly avoidable'. The most important reasons for this are more related to the relatively small size of these states and the ease (i.e. low cost) of their absorption rather than the promises of the EU leaders to "stick to [their] existing commitments" (Oli Rehn, 2006).⁸ For similar reasons which will be discussed in more detail in the third section of this paper, further EU expansion to the east into the region of post-communist non-Baltic Soviet states continues to be highly hypothetical, despite the undisputable European geographic location of these countries.

2. ARE THERE ANY OBJECTIVE LIMITS TO EU (EASTERN) ENLARGEMENT?

Although the post-2004 enlargement scepticism and *enlargement fatigue* were mostly initiated with fears which were not confirmed by later development

⁶ Especially regarding cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague.

⁷ This is dominantly impacted by the prolonged ethnic and national disputes regarding the statehood of Bosnia-Herzegovina, FYR Macedonia and most recently Serbia and Kosovo, which despite strong EU involvement and leverage continues to destabilise the political scene in related countries and the region as a whole (for more detail see Petrovic, 2004 and 2009; Hayden, 2005; Vankovska, 2007, Panagiotou, 2008 and Sahin, 2009).

⁸ See also European Council, Presidency Conclusions, 2006a and 2008.

trends,⁹ they have helped formulate a legitimate question of whether the EU can really afford to expand so much to include in its membership all of the countries which are geographically located in Europe (as stated in the Treaty of Rome) without jeopardising the satisfaction of basic political and socio-economic motives for its foundation and functioning. While there are pretty convincing arguments that this question is highly hypothetical when considering a dynamic and quite long time horizon (of at least the next 20-30 years) in which possible future enlargements may occur and in which EU institutional capacity may also expand enough to absorb all potential candidates (Emerson et al., 2006), others claim that the capacity of the European Union for further enlargements has already been exhausted. Hence, the abovementioned structural/constructivist explanations, which insist on the importance of the similarities of longstanding social structures, values and norms (Huntington, 1996; White et al, 2005) and on these grounds have defined EU 'responsibility' and its actions as an organisation and a "community building agency" (Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier 2002, 510) towards its eastern neighbours of the same 'collective identity' (Sedelmeier, 2006; Schimmelfennig, 2002) provide a quite straightforward answer to the above question:

EU eastern enlargement is limited to the admission of those countries of the former Eastern European bloc which share the same values, norms and identity (especially regarding political democracy, the market economy, respect for the rule of law and cultural/religious habits and norms) as the Western 'old' EU member states. The limits of EU eastern enlargement were more or less already reached with the 2004 enlargement, and possibly only Croatia, the only remaining non-EU country of 'Western Civilisation' (Huntington, 1996; Seroka, 2008) should be allowed to become the final member of the Union.

However, despite the undeniable importance of some 'autonomous' actions of the EU as an institution (or "international organisation", Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier, 2002) which cannot be explained by purely rational motives,¹⁰

⁹As discussed in the previous section, these fears regarding socio-economic stability and prosperity in the old EU member states were primarily present in some political circles, media and the broader public rather than among the political leaders of EU member states and EU officials.

¹⁰ As is, for instance, the decision to accept some countries which did not fully complete the required conditions (Phinnemore, 2010) as well as the above explained tightened conditions for accession after 2006.

such defined limits of EU enlargement have failed the test of empirical accuracy thus far. While the very foundation of the EU (i.e. its predecessor the EEC), which can be considered as its "initial enlargement", was accomplished at a time when a 'common organisation' did not exist which could have autonomously "pushed things" and when the most dominant 'common value' shared between the two major founding members – France and Germany – was nothing other than a century-long history of mutual political animosity and confrontation (see e.g. Litner, 1999), the Union has already enlarged beyond the borders of "Western civilisation". Furthermore, since the accession of Bulgaria and Romania (two countries of "non-Western civilisation") in 2007, the Union has not shown any especially new weaknesses in its functioning.¹¹ The identification of the limits to new EU enlargement(s) that would go beyond a "pure geographic consideration" contended in the Treaty of Rome, should be therefore primarily sought in rational explanations. These define the motives for EU enlargement as basically being the same as those which were behind the EU's foundation in 1957 (Litner, 1999) and which are most generally related to the improvement of member states' and their people's collective and individual socio-economic and political wellbeing (compare Zielonka, 2006, esp. pp. 49-54). Accordingly, the limits of EU enlargement are determined by the ability of both the EU as an organisation and its existing member states to continue to successfully satisfy people's needs to improve their wellbeing after any new enlargement.

The experience of the 2004/07 EU enlargement (and all previous enlargement rounds) regarding the successful satisfaction of the motives for Union enlargement can neither be judged as being anything other than positive thus far, nor can it be used as an indication that the EU of today is close to its enlargement limits. If eastern enlargement of the European Union has been the best, if not (as the experience of those less successful shows) the only effective way of receiving the necessary financial assistance and expert advice for governments of the European post-communist states who pursued economic and socio-political reform, it has also been confirmed as the most successful EU "external relations tool" (Phinnimore, 2006, p.7), "foreign policy" (Schimmelfenning, 2008, p. 918) and "policy instrument and...conflict

¹¹ It should be noted that recent socio-economic problems in the EU's member states are primarily related to the emergence of the world economic crisis in 2008 which have nothing in common with EU enlargement. Despite some worrying negative trends in the Baltic states and Hungary, the current economic weaknesses are exclusively related to the old member states – such as Greece, Portugal, Ireland, Italy.

prevention mechanism" (Tzaifikis, 2007, p. 59), which has brought significant benefits to the "old" member states and their citizens' wellbeing. By allowing and assisting the former communist "easterners" to "join the club" under the conditions of full compliance with the Western-designed criteria regarding the establishment of functioning institutions of democracy and a market economy (and some other less substantial criteria), West Europeans expected economic benefits in opening and penetrating new markets but even more importantly the political assurance that the previous Cold War division of the continent would not be possible to re-establish (at least not on the same geographic lines on which it had been drawn between 1945 and 1989) and endanger their wellbeing. Through its direct and deep involvement in the institutional (re)building of the candidate states, EU enlargement - rather than membership in any other Western (Euro-Atlantic) integration, including NATO, which all former easterners quickly joined after they got rid of communism¹² - was by far the most important tool to deliver this assurance.

While political stability and security on the continent by definition proportionally increases with the accession of any new member state (which fully complies with the required conditions) and as such cannot impose any (rational) limits to EU enlargement, the internal socio-political stability within individual EU member states and economic wellbeing of their citizens theoretically may be threatened by the increase of the number of membership states. Although the fears and doubts about general macroeconomic trends and the capacity of EU markets (especially the labour market) to absorb new members have not materialised after the 2004/07 enlargement round (Table 1; see also Emerson et al., 2006 and Boetcher, 2009), this does not mean that under certain circumstances the accession of economically less-developed countries into the EU cannot cause - at least in the short to medium term - imbalances in the markets in the 'old' member states and an unequal distribution of economic benefits and costs among them (Nunget, 2004).¹³

¹² Since the requirements for membership were relatively modest, most post-communist states from the Euro-Asian region became members of organisations such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO just a few years after the collapse of communist party rule. All those mentioned above who have since become members of the EU had previously been admitted to NATO.

¹³ These are primarily related to a potential 'flood' of the labour markets in the 'old' member states with the 'cheap' workforce from the less-developed new members. Although this did not happen on a general scale, some countries (especially the UK and Ireland) who decided not to use the possibility of retaining 7-year restrictions and opened their markets from the very beginning to workers from the countries which joined the EU in 2004, have

However, the ability or "capacity" of EU *institutions* to adjust to the enlarged number of member states, i.e. to continue making "effective and accountable [decisions]" (EU Commission, 2006, p.20), especially those regarding common EU policies and their financing through the EU budget,¹⁴ appears to be a potentially bigger challenge.

The capacity of the EU as a whole and especially its institutions "to function well" has already been empirically challenged with the rapid increase of EU membership during the 2004/07 enlargement process and a parallel increase in the number of tasks and complexity in the functioning of EU institutions, which were originally designed for a "smaller Union". Being aware of this, the EU and its ("old") member states' leaders have tried to find a more suitable institutional arrangement for a rapidly enlarging Union since almost the very beginning of the 2004 enlargement process.¹⁵ While the adoption of the Nice Treaty in 2000 was considered as a temporary solution, the EU Constitution - which was rejected by French and Dutch citizens at referenda in May and June 2005 respectively - was offered as a longstanding institutional arrangement. It is not surprising that this rejection was, as earlier discussed, one of the major reasons for the emergence of *enlargement fatigue* after the 2004 enlargement and the introduction of the EU's *absorption capacity* as the main criterion for the increased toughness of the accession conditions for new applicants. Although the current experience has confirmed EU *absorption capacity* as a theoretical and politically subjective rather than empirically measurable and objective category, the necessity for a redesign of EU institutions in a more federalist way, especially regarding the reduced number of direct member states' representation in them and the increased presence of qualified majority voting (instead of the previously dominated unanimity) in their decision-making processes cannot be defined other than as a real objective consequence of the "very enlarged" EU of 27+ members. This itself is *objective* enough to raise the question (at least among those

faced certain imbalances due to the large increase of the cheaper labour force from Central Europe, especially from the largest entrant Poland (which had a high level of domestic unemployment - see Table 1).

¹⁴ As 'key policy areas' on which the EU Commission has 'promised' to "provide substantial assessments of the impacts of accession" in the above cited document were listed "the movement of persons, border management, agriculture, cohesion policy...transport...energy policy and foreign and security policy"(EU Commission, 2006, p. 21).

¹⁵ A detailed overview of these attempts is given in Poole, 2003.

member states and EU politicians who have not ever been especially supportive of the idea of a "federative Europe") of whether the EU for exclusively rationalist reasons will ever be able to enlarge to the geographic borders of Europe.

3. HOW FAR EXACTLY TO THE EAST?

As the findings presented in the previous section have shown, the only rationally defined objective limits that can prevent the EU from expanding up to the geographical borders of the continent can be found in the capacity of its institution to continue to function well after enlargement(s). Although the capacity of EU institutions *to continue to function well, i.e. increase the wellbeing of its citizens* can potentially increase along with new enlargements (as thus far has most dramatically happened after the 2004/07 enlargement), the fact that this institutional capacity increase can be achieved more or less exclusively by increasing the federative components in the character of the functioning of these institutions has already caused some problems (or at least tensions) among the EU's and its member states' leaders and officials.¹⁶ Despite the more or less uninterrupted continuation of the "daily routine of the EU's decision making process" (Emerson et al., 2006, 15) the very uncertainty regarding the adoption of the (new) EU Constitution and some of its proposals was one of the major reasons which led the EU officials to not only tighten the criteria for new membership candidates, but even to stop with any new enlargements after the constitution was rejected in the French and Dutch referendums.¹⁷ Although the uncertainty regarding the EU's

¹⁶ The Irish government, for instance, decided to call for a second national referendum on the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty (after it was rejected in the first referendum held in June 2008) only after the Council of the European Union agreed to adopt guarantees that the number of the members of the European Commission (Commissioners) will not be reduced as originally proposed in the Treaty, but will continue to include one representative of each member states and also that the Treaty would not infringe on the Irish national sovereignty in the areas of taxation, family issues and state neutrality (see European Council Presidency Conclusions, Brussels, 18-19 June, 2009).

¹⁷ So, after the EU Commission had made the decision to recommend the accession of Bulgaria and Romania on 1 January 2007, the Commission's President Barroso openly announced that this would also be the last enlargement for the time being: "We are not in a position to further integrate Europe without further institutional reform. There are limits to our absorptive capacity" (International Herald Tribune, 26 September 2006). Furthermore, the French and German governments had officially declared a freeze on new enlargement until the adoption of the new (i.e. Lisbon) treaty on the EU's institutional pre-composition (see e.g. Vucheva, 2009).

'institutional vacuum' has been mostly overcome by the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty or "revised EU constitution" in late 2009, this positive development has been more or less annulled with the emergence of the world economic crisis in 2008 and its impact on the EU's member states. Regardless of the objectively increased capacity of the Union by this treaty to further enlarge, the political climate in its leading member states in this regard is still sombre and has not changed much since the emergence of *enlargement fatigue* in the mid-2000s.

While political leaders and the people of Croatia are still celebrating the EU's decision of June 2011 to accept this post-Yugoslav state as its 28th member and the 11th from formerly communist Eastern Europe in 2013, the EU's leading politicians and officials continue to effectively discourage new and potential applicants for EU membership. Pressured by the extending duration of the global economic crisis and the serious threat of the financial collapse of at least half a dozen (old) EU member states, EU leaders have continued with enlargement 'policy' based on the combination of a pre-Lisbon introduced set of restrictive policy measures with an optimistic 'pro-enlargement' rhetoric. As a direct consequence, even the 'done deal' of the inclusion of all the (Western) Balkan states into the Union after ten years of negotiations and the gradual fulfilment of the imposed conditions for EU (pre)accession, seems today to be a very long way off despite some encouraging steps undertaken immediately after the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in late 2009.¹⁸ Furthermore, the occasionally very intensive discussions during the 1990s and in the early 2000s on potential further EU expansion to the east in the region of the non-Baltic post-Soviet states have more or less completely ceased in recent years. Even Ukraine, whose governments had persistently demanded to be considered at least as a potential candidate for EU membership long before the 'Orange Revolution' of December 2004-January 2005 (Petrovic, 2004), seems to have lost any hope for this to happen. The loss of the pro-European parties in its latest elections is a logical consequence of this development in addition to mistakes in domestic politics and mutual divisions among these parties.

¹⁸ The introduction of a visa-free regime between the EU and Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro, the unfreezing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with Serbia and the official submission of Serbia's (and earlier Albania's) application for EU membership (see Table 2).

Regardless of the current negative attitudes towards further enlargement of the EU which have been further strengthened with the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis in 2011 and the long delay in the accession process of the countries in question, it can be expected that in the relatively 'longer medium term' of 5-8 years all the Western Balkan states may join the Union. As earlier stated, the most important reasons for this "optimism" are not related to the *strong commitment* of EU political leaders to keep their promises on the EU future of these states and the issuing of occasional reassurances in this regard, which however have not been repeated at the highest level (i.e. in the form of the European Council's Presidency Conclusions) between June 2008 and June 2011,¹⁹ but are primarily due to the very small size of all these states.²⁰ In spite of some risks regarding the prolonged internal political instability of these states and their more or less interrupted democratisation in most recent years (Table 2)²¹ the awareness of the political and intellectual elite in the core EU member states that due to their small size, the accession of these states cannot be (even in a short run) any serious burden for the economies of the current EU-27 - even less so for the functioning of common EU institutions - should play a decisive role in this regard. The gains which the current members of the Union will get after the inclusion of 19 million Western Balkan inhabitants (and a combined territory size which is 15% smaller than Romania) especially regarding the improving prospects for lasting peaceful and politically stable development on the continent as a whole will undoubtedly be much higher than the costs of either having them "in the club" or leaving them "out".

¹⁹ When it was finally again expressed in June 2011 when accompanying the Council's decision on the accession of Croatia, the EU's commitment for accession of the remaining Western Balkan states sounded less optimistic and convincing than the previous ones. While in its meeting in June 2008 the European Council has stated that "[It] reaffirms its full support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans...[which states] should achieve candidate status, according to their own merits, with EU membership as the ultimate goal" in June 2011 it stated *only that* [The conclusion of the accession negotiations with Croatia] bring a new momentum to the European perspective of the Western Balkans, provided these countries continue on the path of reform" (European Council, June 2008, point 52 and European Council, June 2011, point 32).

²⁰ After the exclusion of Croatia, whose accession to the EU has been confirmed, the combined population living in all 5 (or 6 if Kosovo is counted as independent) remaining Western Balkan states is some 19 million, which is 3 million less than the current population of Romania or 4 times less than that of Turkey.

²¹ For which, however, the EU also bears a certain responsibility (Petrovic, 2009; Grabbe, 2010).

Table 2 Progress in post-communist reform and SAP

Country	Democracy*		Economic Transition*		SA Agreement	Applicat. for EU Members.	Official Candidate Status
	2005	2010	2005	2010			
Albania	4.04	3.93	2.9	3.1	YES (12/06/2006, in force since 1/04/09)	YES (28/04/2009)	NO
Bosnia-Herzegovina	4.18	4.25	2.6	2.8	YES (16/06/08)	NO	NO
Croatia	3.75	3.71	3.4	3.5	YES (29/10/2001, in force since 1/02/05)	YES (20/02/2003)	YES (18/06/2004, Acc. Negotiations: Oct 2005 to June 2011)
FYR Macedonia	3.89	3.79	3.0	3.3	YES (9/04/2001, inforce since 1/04/04)	YES (22/03/2004)	YES (16/12/2005) ***
Montenegro	3.79	3.79	2.6	2.9	YES (15/10/2007, in forcesince 1/05/10)	YES (15/12/2008)	YES (17/12/2010) ***
Serbia	3.75	3.71	2.6	2.9	YES (29/04/2008) **	YES (22/12/2009)	NO
Romania	3.39	3.46	3.2	3.5	1993 (Eu Agr)	1995	Member (1/01/07)
Bulgaria	3.18	3.04	3.4	3.6	1993 (Eu Agr)	1995	Member (1/01/07)

* Freedom House Nations in Transit "Democratisation score" (1 being the highest; 7 being the lowest), and the simple average of EBRD transition indicators (4+ or 4.3 denotes a standard and performance comparable to advanced industrial economies; 1 denotes little or no change from a "rigid centrally planned economy").

** frozen pending Serbian cooperation with the ICTY from 29/04/2008 to 7/12/2009

*** Accession negotiations are still waiting to be opened.

However, on the same grounds, the accessions of Turkey as an official but for many a 'doubtful' candidate²² and the European post-Soviet states, which are currently not being considered for accession but which have 'the right' to apply once their political leaders express such a desire and once they have met necessary criteria, are much less certain even in the long term and under different political circumstances than nowadays. The reasons for this are not in the different ('inadequately European') cultural backgrounds and values or 'proven' anti-democratic tradition and impossibility of adoption of European norms and standards in these countries and by their peoples as argued by the protagonists and supporters of structuralist/constructivist explanations of the limits of EU enlargement.²³ The actual reason is once again related to the countries' size and the limited capacity of EU institutions, especially the common policies to absorb (even in the long term) very large countries like Turkey and especially Russia. While the EU future of Moldova, Belarus, and even Ukraine and Turkey can be imaginable in the long term and under very different political circumstances, the dream of the EU/EEC founding fathers to stretch it "from the Atlantic to the Urals" and include a country which is several times larger than the area of the current EU-27 will probably always stay a dream.

4. CONCLUSION

While the subjective limits of the eastern enlargement of the European Union are defined by the prevailing political attitudes for the time being that have been established as a result of the interaction of various rational and non-rational factors, the objective limits of EU eastern enlargement are defined by the capacity of EU institutions and policies to 'absorb' new candidates. As the eastern borders of Europe in the Urals are located in a country which is several times the area of the current EU-27, it is almost impossible to imagine that the European Union could ever stretch "from the Atlantic to the Urals" as

²² In addition to strong opposition of an important part of the wide public and many conservative politicians and parties all around the current EU member states, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has repeatedly expressed his opposition to Turkish entry into the EU and promised that if it 'became a serious issue while he was president he would call a referendum' (EU business, 24 April, 2008 <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/1209068222.76>), while German Chancellor Merkel has continued to prefer 'privileged partnership' rather than full EU membership for Turkey (Pop, 2009; Mara, 2011).

²³ For a more detailed critique of the argument on the significant cultural/civilisational differences between modern Russia and most other 'non-European' post-Soviet states on one side and the rest of Europe on the other see e.g. Robert Bideleux, 2009.

dreamed by its founding fathers, even if the political will on both sides was much more in favour of that than it is today.

Some type of a privileged or strategic partnership which has been proposed by German Chancellor Merkel for solving the "question of Turkish candidacy" – "everything but membership" – could possibly be a tool for establishing a long lasting and prosperous EU relationship with Russia even at a time when it would be different than today and be able or willing to fully satisfy EU accession conditions. Only then, without the conditions of long-lasting competition and confrontation with the "Russian Bear", will the above noted small and relatively small countries between Russia and the current eastern borders of the Union have some real chance to apply for EU membership and allow the continent as a whole to enjoy real peace and political stability.

Dr Milenko Petrović*

KAKO DEFINISATI GRANICE ŠIRENJA EU NA ISTOK: "ZAMOROM PROŠIRENJA", JEDNAKIM VREDNOSTIMA I NORMAMA ILI "APSORPCIONIM KAPACITETOM"?

Rezime

Uprkos pozitivnim rezultatima u pružanju neophodne pomoći za sprovođenje demokratskih i tržišnih reformi u zemljama bivše "socijalističke Evrope" i unapredjenju političke stabilnosti i mira na kontinetu u celini, proširenje Evropske unije se približilo svojim krajnjim istočnim granicama. Ukazujuci na osnovne uzroke i različite teorijske interpretacije pojave tzv. „zamora (od novih) proširenja" [enlargement fatigue] u ključnim zemljama EU posle uspešnog okončanja „mega-proširenja" 2004/07, ovaj rad iznosi osnovni argument da su granice daljeg širenja Unije na istok definisane kombinovanim delovanjem subjektivnih i objektivnih faktora. Dok se, na raznim, racionalnim i ne-racionalnim faktorima zasnovana dominantna politička opredeljenja i vizije u ključnim članicam Unije pojavljuju kao osnovne subjektivne determinante daljeg širenja EU, objektivne granice buduceg proširenja EU na istok su

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prvenstveno odredjene racionalno definisanim objektivnim kapacitetom njenih institucija da 'apsorbuje' nove članove.

Ključne reči: Granice širenja EU, "zamor od proširenja", objektivne granice proširenja, racionalna i druga objašnjenja, absorpcioni kapacitet institucija Evropske Unije.

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