

Extending European Union Membership to the Eastern Neighbourhood

Written by Alexander Simm

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Wherever the European Union (EU) goes, calls for extending the 'golden carrot' of membership are never too far behind. Acclaimed for its 'transformative power' (Grabbe, 2006) in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), enlargement now often seems the go-to solution for remedying ills within the 'neighbourhood'. Despite the EU's official stance of 'everything but the institutions' (Magan, 2006), the question of eventual membership has remained the elephant in the room as far as the Eastern neighbours[1] are concerned. Particularly in times of crisis, such as Ukraine's Orange revolution, calls to extend membership prospects to these countries – and thereby anchor in a European trajectory – have been voiced time and again.

The question upon us, then, is whether the EU should promise the Eastern partners eventual membership—in particular, what the arguments for and against doing so are, as things currently stand. This essay examines both sides of the debate concerning this matter. It contends, however, that the EU should keep membership for the Eastern partners off the table, at least for the foreseeable future. The case for extending membership to the Eastern neighbourhood countries, it is argued, overly extrapolates from the EU's experience in CEE and neglects both the practicalities of enlargement and realities of the neighbourhood. Recourse to the scheme of the CEE experience and the path-dependent thinking it promotes, moreover, serves to obscure variables absent during the CEE enlargement but very much present in the neighbourhood context, such as geopolitical considerations.

From Partnership to Membership: Bringing the 'Ring of Friends' into the Fold

Arguments for extending membership to the Eastern partners are primarily based on the EU's experience with the CEE countries. In the wake of the Cold War's end, the EU moved from association with the newly independent states of CEE towards enlargement, which set in motion an incremental process of transformation (Schimmelfennig, 2001; Grabbe, 2006). While by no means a foregone conclusion, the eventual outcome proved significant: by 2004, the former Eastern bloc had been transformed beyond recognition. And so, consequently, enlargement policy came to be viewed widely as the EU's most effective foreign policy instrument.

Enlargement, argues Keukeleire (2008), is a structural foreign policy: its fundamental aim is to shape the EU's external environment through offering conditional incentives – of which membership is the 'golden carrot' – in return for reform of political, economic and social structures. In a similar fashion, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has sought the same ends beyond the enlargement context, that is, without offering EU membership. As Cadier (2013) argues, however, the latter's track record has proved markedly poor; indeed, reviewing the neighbourhood a decade on, the ENP has manifestly failed to replicate a transformative power of the kind witnessed in CEE.

For many, though, the key reason for this failure is not elusive, but quite obvious: without the carrot of membership, the EU simply lacks the requisite leverage over its Eastern partners to induce transformation. Indeed, certain analysts conclude that the incentive structure of 'money, markets and mobility' (Cadier, 2013) has proved clearly insufficient and suggest – implicitly or explicitly – that the EU must extend membership to the neighbourhood countries if it hopes to produce results remotely akin to the CEE enlargement (Schimmelfennig, 2005; 2007).

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By extending membership to the Eastern partners, then, the EU stands to gain the necessary leverage over these countries and thus strengthen its structural foreign policy vis-à-vis the neighbourhood substantially. Extrapolating from the EU's experience in CEE, the offer of membership would serve as a sizeable enough incentive to offset the costs of compliance with conditionality and, therefore, anchor in a European trajectory for the Eastern partners. The subsequent processes of transformation would, moreover, be expected to achieve many of the EU's original objectives in the region including, but not limited to, the promotion of democracy, economic liberalisation, prosperity, and overall stability on the EU's periphery. And this, ultimately, would go a substantial way towards ameliorating the growing divide between the 'insiders' and 'outsiders' of the European project (Smith, 2005; Langbein, 2014).

Practicalities of Enlargement, Realities of the Neighbourhood

Assuming that region-wide transformation reminiscent of the CEE enlargement would follow from extending membership perspectives to the Eastern partners is wishful thinking to say the least, however. Indeed, to argue as such is to neglect the domestic political will and momentum that proved so crucial in CEE, and the patent lack thereof among the countries of the Eastern partnership (Magan, 2006). Recent developments in Ukraine notwithstanding, most of these states have grown more autocratic, corrupt and economically stagnant since the ENP's inception a decade ago (Cadier, 2013). Even if the EU were to grant membership perspectives to these countries, then, the conditions for compliance in the neighbourhood – and thus for the EU's transformative power to take root – are markedly less auspicious than in CEE or, for that matter, many states of the Western Balkans (Magan, 2006; Epstein & Sedelmeier, 2008).

The most prevalent conceptual framework for analysing the dynamics of the enlargement process is that presented by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004): the *external incentives model*. Compliance with the EU's conditionality, they argue, relies primarily on the size and speed of rewards, the credibility of conditionality and the size of domestic adoption costs. In what follows, these variables are examined with regard to the Eastern partners in order to demonstrate how, if membership perspectives were granted, transformation of the neighbourhood would be far from assured.

It makes sense to treat the first pair of variables together, since the two are intimately related. The reward on offer – EU membership – has proved sizeable enough in every previous round of enlargement. Yet, at the same time, membership has not been universally desired by those offered the prospect; in this regard, Switzerland, Norway, and, most recently, Iceland are all case in point. For an Eastern partner to decline the offer, then, should not be considered beyond the spectrum of possibility; indeed, only half of the Eastern neighbourhood countries have declared European integration a foreign policy objective, while the others have exhibited little interest, if not outright hostility toward the idea (Cadier, 2013).

The speed of the membership reward, moreover, is undoubtedly problematic for the neighbourhood countries. Should an Eastern neighbour desire membership, the time lag in their membership perspective would prove significant. Indeed, that country would most likely find itself at the back of the membership queue, behind the likes of Macedonia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Albania, whose transformations are currently stagnant (Vachudova, 2014). What is more, questions of the EU's 'absorption capacity' and concerns over 'enlargement fatigue' (Cadier, 2013) would inevitably enter the equation with time, particularly in regard to the larger countries of the Eastern partnership such as Ukraine and – dare we say – Belarus. And the sum of all these issues, in turn, would prove highly detrimental to the credibility of the EU's conditionality. After all, if the new candidates had little reason to view the reward of membership as credible and proximate, or the EU as forthcoming, they would be left with very little incentive to undertake painstaking reforms (Magan, 2006).

If the lack of external stimulus were not enough, however, the size of domestic adoption costs within the Eastern partnership countries would most certainly stymie reform. "Even where a credible membership perspective exists," argues Magan (2006), "evidence indicates that high domestic costs of adaptation to EU rules have undermined compliance" (p.418). And these costs, she contends, are substantially higher for non-democratic polities, whose very power bases are threatened by liberal political and economic reforms (*ibid.*). Thus in a region where hybrid regimes and autocracies are the rule rather than the exception, reforms threatening the political survival of incumbents are

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unlikely to be approximated, regardless of an upgraded incentive structure.

As should be clear from the above, it is misleading to extrapolate from the EU's experience in CEE with regard to the Eastern partners. And it is out of touch with the reality of the neighbourhood, moreover, to conjecture that extending membership perspectives to these countries would necessarily lead to similar transformations, even over the longer term. Indeed, considering the recent turmoil in Ukraine, it might justifiably be argued that offering EU membership could foment similar calamities across the neighbourhood, as popular insurrections move towards ousting their intransigent leaders, themselves caught in a dilemma of political survival. What is more, in a region where underlying ethnic tension and frozen conflicts abound, such upheavals beget even more explosive potential.

The Shared Neighbourhood: Enter Geopolitics

All this, however, is to neglect a crucial variable absent in the CEE enlargement, but overtly present in the neighbourhood: the presence of a countervailing power set on preventing transformation, a 'black knight' (Levitsky and Way, 2010), or saboteur of sorts. In this case, it is the Russian Federation. Whether distracted by NATO's expansion or simply unmindful of the consequences, Russia did not protest against – let alone attempt to subvert – the EU's enlargement to the former Eastern bloc (Light, Wight & Loewenhardt, 2000). Moscow's stance towards its 'near abroad', however, has been far less accommodating. For what is advocated by the EU as crucial for stability on its new borders is, conversely, perceived by Putin and his entourage as a threat penetrating Russia's age-old periphery and traditional sphere of influence (Averre, 2009). And so, consequently, the EU's structural foreign policy in the neighbourhood has met increasingly with Russian countermeasures.

While the EU and Russia have had competing agendas over the 'shared neighbourhood' since the ENP's inception a decade ago (Gowens & Timmins, 2009), Russia has only latterly asserted itself as an overtly countervailing force against the EU's structural foreign policy. Firstly, argues Sasse (2013), Russia has increasingly exploited its dense linkages throughout the neighbourhood – particularly in the energy sector – to exert leverage over the Eastern partners; for instance, in Ukraine, where politics has proved acutely vulnerable to energy-related disputes. At the same time, Russia has projected alternatives to European integration, such as the Customs Union and broader Eurasian Union (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2012; Cadier, 2013). In so doing, Moscow has proved keen to present these regimes as an alternate path to modernisation, without the painstaking reforms demanded by Brussels.

That being said, while neighbours such as Belarus and, most recently, Armenia have been allured by such alternatives, recent developments in Ukraine manifest others' refusal to follow suit, irrespective of Russian pressure. Yet the very same case reveals, more importantly, how broader questions of geopolitics enter the equation. As with Georgia in 2008, so, too, with Ukraine today, Russia is responding to what it perceives as Western encroachments into its near abroad by demonstrating its hard power through shows of force which the EU can neither afford to provoke nor counterpoise. (Popescu & Wilson, 2009; BBC, 2014). This, in turn, should lead us to thoroughly consider the geopolitical implications of extending membership to a region that Moscow still perceives – rightly or wrongly – as its sphere of influence, before taking a step of such consequence. Failing to do so could risk not only fomenting instability in the neighbourhood, but ultimately jeopardising European security.

Conclusion

This essay has examined the arguments for and against promising eventual EU membership to the Eastern partners, as things currently stand. However, it has clearly been argued against doing so. The case for extending membership to the Eastern partners, it has been argued, overly extrapolates from the EU's enlargement to CEE. Consequently, it rests on the assumption that transformative processes to democracy, market economy, and overall stability in these countries would eventually follow the offer of EU membership in a fashion reminiscent of the CEE enlargement. Yet this kind of path-dependent thinking is heedless both to the practicalities of enlargement – in particular, the acute time lag from the back of the accession queue – and the realities of the neighbourhood, where non-democratic regimes with entrenched power bases remain the norm. Examined through the prism of the external incentives model, it has been contended that if membership were offered, the outlook for transformation would be manifestly inauspicious.

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It has been suggested, moreover, that offering membership might inadvertently destabilise certain neighbourhood countries, where meaningful transition is still forthcoming and frozen conflicts endure – conditions that markedly differentiate the Eastern partners from their CEE counterparts. In this vein, offering membership could precipitate upheavals akin to recent events in Ukraine, whose trajectories are notoriously difficult to gauge. What is more, the current crisis shows us most conspicuously that the EU is by no means the only player in the neighbourhood.

On the contrary, Russia has reasserted itself stridently in recent years not only through wielding considerable leverage over the countries of its near abroad, but also presenting them with alternatives to European integration. Together with its recent displays of hard power, it now appears that Russia is determined to rebut further encroachments into its traditional sphere of influence. Geopolitical considerations, therefore, must be taken seriously when discussing the prospect of extending membership to the Eastern partners. For the foreseeable future, however, it has been argued here that the EU should keep this option off the table.

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[1] Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine

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