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## Three Lessons From the 2004 “Big Bang” Enlargement

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### Abstract

The 2004 “Big Bang” enlargement was a powerful reminder that European integration is an instrument for peace and not just prosperity. The pace of that enlargement depended more on the requirements for stability than on the transformation of the candidate countries. It was also a reminder of the importance of forward-looking analysis. Candidates might meet the criteria for membership at the time of accession, but that is no guarantee that they will develop in ways that continue to reflect those criteria once they have gained entry. Finally, it was a reminder that enlargement changes the experience of membership for all member states and not just for those countries that gain entry. A larger Union requires greater self-discipline to hold down congestion in decision-making and greater multilateral surveillance to prevent the actions of one member state from undermining the benefits of membership for the rest. These reminders are important lessons in planning the European Union’s next historic enlargement. The next enlargement will follow a pace set by security considerations more than the transformative power of the accession process. It will depend on a robust analysis of convergence together with contingency planning for any staged accession. And it will require commitment from existing member states as well as candidate countries to what will become a very different European Union. This next enlargement will be challenging for all parts of Europe. Nevertheless, it is better than the alternative of no enlargement or an accession process with no credible endgame.

### Keywords

accession; Central Europe; Eastern Europe; enlargement; European integration; European Union; regional integration; Russian invasion; Ukraine; Western Balkans

## 1. Introduction

The European Council announced in December 2023 that it would open accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova, added Bosnia and Herzegovina to the list of countries of the Western Balkans who are already

engaged in accession negotiations, and granted candidate status to Georgia. If successful, this new round of enlargement could add as many as nine member states to the European Union. The scale is comparable to the “Big Bang” enlargement of 2004. However, given the diversity of the candidate countries involved and the domestic and international challenges they face, this next round of enlargement is even more ambitious. Nevertheless, the European Council seems determined both to launch this process and to bring it to completion. Not all member states agree with the idea of a 2030 target date, but there is an agreement that the process should make consistent and demonstrable progress. Most member states also accept that success may ultimately require a fixed target date to ensure that the process has sufficient momentum.

The “Big Bang” enlargement teaches us a lot about the strength of the European Council’s determination to enlarge. Specifically, it reminds us that there are moments when the pace of accession reflects the broader requirements for European security more than the transformation of the candidate countries. By focusing on this point, we complement the argument made by Navrátil and Lovec (2024) in their editorial introduction. At its core, the European project is at least as much about peace as it is about prosperity. That emphasis on peace is a source of strength. As Navrátil and Lovec (2024) underscore, the “Big Bang” enlargement also shows the unequal effects of the transformative power of European integration. The accession process created leverage to help accession countries meet the convergence criteria. That leverage largely dissipated once the candidates became member states and was replaced with competing processes of resistance to change and inevitable deeper integration. But that is not the whole of the story. Importantly, assessments of convergence failed to highlight how those candidate countries might develop once they acquired membership. Finally, the “Big Bang” enlargement revealed the implications of having a wider and more diverse membership for all member states. It also revealed the extent to which formal enlargement was only part of the reason for that transformation of the European Union. The “Big Bang” enlargement was challenging, but the alternative of no enlargement or an interminable accession process would have been even harder for the European Union to digest.

## 2. Strategic Imperative

Real time or contemporary analysis of the “Big Bang” enlargement focused on its transformative potential. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe were engaged in a dual transition from communist authoritarianism and a centrally planned economy to liberal democracy and free markets. The European Council established the 1993 Copenhagen criteria to set benchmarks for achievement in qualifying for membership. The European Commission used those benchmarks to exercise both active and passive forms of leverage over the governments of the candidate countries to ensure they undertook the necessary political and economic reforms to complete their transition process. That enlargement ran alongside a widening interest in the Europeanization of politics and policymaking across the European Union in a uniquely dense framework for multilevel governance. The success of that enlargement in 2004 was widely regarded as a demonstration of the transformative power of Europe.

That view of the “Big Bang” enlargement is accurate but incomplete. The European Union did succeed in demonstrating its transformative power. But it also showed significant flexibility in terms of the pace and timing of the accession process and of the application of its criteria for membership (Anghel & Jones, 2022). What started as a slow process with a limited number of candidate countries that were constrained to move together at the same pace suddenly shifted at the end of 1999 to a much quicker process with a wider number of countries that could compete with one another to see who could complete accession negotiations the

fastest. The criteria that were announced in Copenhagen in 1993 as prerequisites to begin talks became goals to achieve at the end of the accession process when the decision was taken to conclude the “Big Bang” enlargement in Copenhagen in 2002. In the case of Bulgaria and Romania, some of those goals could be met after accession to full membership.

This acceleration, widening, and loosening of the enlargement process started in June 1999, when the European Council “invited” the Commission “to consider measures which can help crystallize [the] prospect [of membership] for all applicant countries” (European Council, 1999, p. 22). In its response, the European Commission acknowledged that the impetus came from the “greater awareness of the strategic dimension of enlargement” provided by the war in Kosovo that unfolded over the spring of that year (European Commission, 1999, p. 4). The result was a faster, more inclusive enlargement process that laid the foundations for the decision by the Copenhagen European Council to admit 10 new member states in 2004 and another two in 2007 (European Council, 2002). The European Council also called for the inclusion of the candidate countries in the negotiation of institutional reforms to run alongside enlargement. And it provided transitional arrangements to support the candidate countries in making their own institutional reforms along the way. For Romania and Bulgaria, such provisions extended beyond formal accession. Transformation was essential, but strategic considerations were imperative.

### 3. Transformative Power

The effectiveness of that transformative power is now open to question. Many commentators looking back on the European Union’s historic enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe focus more attention on the failures than the successes. Hungary and Poland were two countries that played a central role in the fall of communism. They were part of the first group to participate in the enlargement process after the opening of negotiations in 1997. And they were at the vanguard of the dual transition to liberal democracy and market capitalism. Nevertheless, within years of joining the European Union, both countries elected governments with anti-liberal social programs and anti-democratic political ambitions. Hungary slipped furthest after the government of Viktor Orbán came to power with a two-thirds majority that gave it the ability to pass legislation, make key self-serving appointments, and amend the constitution without reference to the opposition. And while the European Union has instruments to push back against these changes, European institutions and member states seem either powerless or unwilling to use them. The result is a sort of “authoritarian equilibrium” (Kelemen, 2020).

These shortcomings are important. It is obviously true that it is more difficult to exercise leverage over a member state than over a candidate country. But it is worth considering whether the difference between the two periods is as great as imagined. A closer examination of Hungary’s political development in the period before it was accepted for membership suggests that the country’s democratic resilience was already and demonstrably under threat (Anghel & Jones, 2024a). In this reading, the problem was not that the accession process failed to lock in Hungary’s dual transformation at the high levels required for membership, but rather that the assessments made of Hungary’s performance in meeting the Copenhagen convergence criteria were ineffective at identifying the true political and economic challenges Hungarians faced. Moreover, what is true for Hungary is also possible for other countries. What is surprising is not those cases where countries failed to live up to the Copenhagen criteria but rather where they were seen as succeeding in such a major transformative process over such a short period with European assistance.

This alternative reading of the experience of Hungary raises the obvious counterfactual: Would that country have had greater or lesser difficulties consolidating liberal democracy and building a market economy outside the European Union? It is hard to look at the experience of Turkey or of the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern European neighborhood, which were either placed in a much slower accession process or never given a membership prospect, and imagine a better outcome outside the European Union. Europe's transformative power during accession is only as great as the credibility of the accession process to offer a clear prospect for membership. The European institutions were right to focus on the strategic imperative of enlargement after the war in Kosovo. The alternatives of a long, inconclusive enlargement or no membership prospect are not favorable if the goal is to ensure the consolidation of liberal democracy and free markets. However, the accession process could be strengthened. The Hungarian case reveals the weakness of static evaluations of performance and the importance of forward-looking scenario planning. Such improvements would only strengthen the advantages of accession over the alternatives.

#### 4. Transformative Enlargement

European integration is a source of European peace and prosperity. European enlargement promises to widen that peace and prosperity to countries that border the European Union. However, the cost of that enlargement is to bring greater diversity and congestion into European institutions and decision-making procedures. It brings more competition into European markets for goods, services, capital, and labor. And it brings greater problems with gamesmanship or free riding, particularly when the transformative power is insufficient to ensure democratic consolidation. The European Union is hardly alone in experiencing these consequences of enlargement. Any international organization that expands its membership faces similar challenges (Anghel & Jones, 2024b). But the European Union is more encompassing than any international organization—closer to a political system in its own right—and so the impact of greater diversity, congestion, and free riding is most consequential for existing member states.

The question is whether this negative impact of enlargement is sufficient justification for overlooking the advantages of enlargement. The answer depends on how the European Union regulates access to the “goods” that it creates, meaning, among others, the single market, the single currency, and the single financial space. In reality, those goods can already be accessed by firms, investors, workers, and people on the move from outside the European Union. The challenge for the European Union is to ensure that these non-state actors do not play a disruptive role in terms of lobbying European institutions, undermining European competitiveness, taking control over strategic sectors of the economy, or seeking to access European labor markets and social services through irregular processes. By engaging directly with the home governments of these non-state actors, enlargement offers the European Union huge leverage over how those non-state actors behave. The transformative power of enlargement is far greater in relations between countries than within them, in that sense. This transformative power is most useful for those countries with which the European Union engages most intensively—and those tend to be the same countries that seek the advantages of membership.

Here again, the choice is between alternatives. The historic enlargement of the European Union to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe changed the experience of membership for all participating countries, both East and West. However, the alternative of engaging economically with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe without enlargement would have been more disruptive and less productive for

the European Union. Enlargement is transformative, but so are the alternatives. The difference with those alternatives is that the direction of transformation is less attractive.

## 5. Conclusion

The “Big Bang” enlargement was a watershed moment in the history of European integration. The lessons it taught are that the European Union is a source of peace and stability, which is its strategic imperative. The transformative power of European integration is not complete or fully controllable, but it is significant, and it can be strengthened through enhanced monitoring and reciprocal surveillance. The transformative power of enlargement for Central and Eastern European countries also shows that its pursuit is often better than the alternatives we witnessed in the countries of the Western Balkans, the Eastern Neighborhood, or Turkey. More importantly, by focusing on the lessons from the “Big Bang” enlargement, policymakers can strengthen the accession process. Enlargement is a strategic imperative, it is better than the alternatives, but that leaves plenty of space for improvement.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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