

What

The EU

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Short Essays
For a Longer Life

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The Democratic Union

Strengthening Democracy in the Wider Europe

The EU has grown from a small and rather introspective club of six to a project which truly embodies a dream of European integration. Other institutions such as the Council of Europe or the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) simply do not have the same potential for democratic transformation let alone for removing barriers between European countries. Most remarkably, the European Union exerts such influence despite the fact that its membership does not comprise the whole of Europe: only 27 of the 50 countries in Europe are member states. By remaining open to enlargement and engaging with all its neighbours, the Union has come to symbolise the desire for democracy and modernisation of European populations – at a time when democracy is otherwise in retreat in Wider Europe.

Our vision for the European Union is thus of an actor which builds on this potential to become an anchor for democracy and the rule of law amongst both its member states and all other countries of the European space.

This paneuropean vision has had several formulations in the past, from Charles de Gaulle's 'Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals' to Mikhail Gorbachev's 'Common European Home'. Since 2003, 'Wider Europe' has been the term of choice. Initially it was a narrow term, referring to the

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European Commission's vision for the neighbours which the EU gained after the 2004/2007

enlargements. Increasingly, as in this essay, it is used to describe an entire geographical and political space – one that includes all 47 members of the Council of Europe plus the three that are excluded for political reasons (Belarus, Kosovo and the Vatican). This essay describes how the EU can shift its policies of democratisation from that of the narrow EU documents to this broader vision – a vision which is both humbler and more ambitious.

Democracy in retreat throughout Europe

Today, democracy in Europe is practically taken for granted. Twenty years ago, a wave of democratisation swept from the Adriatic to the heights of the Pamir. It foundered in places, in particular as conflicts erupted in the Western Balkans and parts of the post-Soviet

space. Yet, peacemaking and peacekeeping progressively ceded their place as the EU's main policy instrument in its neighbourhood. Enlargement policy – either in its original form or in the denatured, weaker form of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) – came to the fore. With this, EU-standards – ranging from democracy, the rule of law and a mild version of capitalism to the technical regulation of a myriad of issues – were all set to prevail throughout the region. This created the illusion of a unipolar Europe in which EU-driven political reform was a given.

The Russian-Georgian war of 2008 put paid to this illusion. Russia – still firmly outside the en-

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largement-driven transformation processes – came to view these as a direct challenge in its “near abroad”. With newly assertive actors on the continent, in particular a resentful Russia and a booming Turkey, the EU may soon find itself offering just one of a number of models in its neighbourhood. Add to this a serious financial and economic crisis which threatens the pillars of European integration and seriously undermines the EU's standing, and suddenly, the idea of an EU-ised Europe in a progressively Europeanised world sounds like a wild dream. Indeed Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard have identified what they call ‘the spectre’ of a multipolar Europe. That ‘spectre’ threatens the EU's capacity to achieve on its own the goal of bringing peace and stability, let alone democracy, to the continent. The evolution of most former Soviet republics certainly suggests that the EU is losing its power of attraction and transformation and, even in the Western Balkans, threats to democracy and stability persist.

It is indicative of the gravity of the situation that, even within the EU, high democratic standards cannot be taken for granted. Besides traditional worries about the democratic deficit of the Union's institutions and their distance from citizens, a new wave of dissatisfaction with national governments and political parties has erupted in the wake of the worst economic crisis to hit Western Europe in decades. The health of democracy is questioned by the rise of single-issue and populist parties, by the mainstream parties that partially adopt their agendas, as well as by the erosion of the separation of powers, by high levels of resilient corruption and by a decrease in the diversity and independence of the media in EU member states.

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Challenged by other powers and increasingly unable to lead by example, the EU is losing the ability to shape its geographical context according to its values. The EU, by treating the domestic politics of its members as issues beyond its competence but at the same time extensively monitoring the political scenes of candidates and potential candidates, is incurring an obvious contradiction: asking more from candidates than from members. What is instead required is an approach that is both more humble and more ambitious. The EU should become humbler by abandoning its ideas of a unipolar European transformation, but more ambitious by involving a greater geographical spread for the EU and its values.

Neighbours or Europeans?

From Neighbourhood to Wider Europe

The EU's efforts to promote stability and democracy in Europe have been inherently unipolar. Seldom has the Union viewed itself as part of a Europe in which other countries and organisations can play a role in ensuring a value-based stability. This is unsurprising given its past successes. Through enlargement, the Union has been able to transform numerous societies, achieving both democracy and economic growth. Yet, this golden age is gone.

In an attempt to replicate its enlargement successes without having to combat the trenchant enlargement fatigue in the EU, the instruments of enlargement policy were picked up in the European Neighbourhood Policy. It was hoped that, despite the lack of an accession perspective, the EU could stimulate stabilisation, conflict resolution and political and economic reform in neighbouring

countries. Today, the limitations of using the methods of enlargement policy without explicitly granting an accession perspective have become clear. Conflicts in some of the EU's neighbours are either stagnant (Transnistria, Nagorno Karabakh) or have actually worsened since the launch of the ENP (Abkhazia, South Ossetia). It is becoming clearer that a détente of deep-rooted hostilities needs specific approaches that cannot be developed by the EU alone.

It is not just that the failure to offer an accession perspective neuters these policies: moves towards a one-size-fits-all policy for ENP are also at the heart of many of these failures. Here too, a lack of trust and consensus between EU members is to blame. The inclusion of the Arab countries and Israel (all explicitly denied an EU accession perspective) in the same policy as the post-Soviet neighbours reflected the demands of those EU members that champion a proactive Mediterranean policy, fearing the neglect of the South in favour of the East. In the event, this choice to group Eastern and Southern members together has not served as a stimulus for the South, nor has it made the Central and Northern EU members any more interested in what happens in the South. It has, however, frustrated countries with EU-membership aspirations, such as Ukraine or Georgia, by clumping them together with distinctly anti-Western regimes such as Libya and Syria. EU policy towards Moldova is put on a par with EU-Lebanon relations rather than policy towards, say, Albania.

Moreover, it is not just the EU's internal limitations which should push the 27 to adopt a less unipolar and altogether more inclusive ap-

proach. The EU is not the only regional power to lay claim to a neighbourhood. Russia and Turkey also talk about their neighbourhoods – and they are referring to a similar geographic zone as the EU. As with previous ideas of a 'sphere of influence', the 'neighbours' are reduced to objects rather than viewed as actors in their own right. With its misplaced unipolar approach, the EU simply encourages such thinking. It has been suggested that European security in the overlapping neighbourhoods could be managed through a 'Concert

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of Powers'-style Trialogue including the EU, Russia and Turkey. Ukraine, a country of 48 million people, would thus become a mere object of political negotiation. Such a Trialogue would probably adopt a 'value-free approach', heralding an acquiescence to the increasing violation by a number of European countries of their commitments to democracy. The model of a Russian-style 'sovereign democracy' is an attractive alternative to elites who prefer an unlimited use of power and the support of the Kremlin over the niceties of messy and often inefficient democratic mechanisms.

Reinvigorating enlargement policy

The other aspect of the Union's more inclusive approach to democracy and stability would actually lie in an ambitious understanding of EU enlargement policy. After all, the EU can only truly reduce the potential for competition with countries, if it reinforces the perspective of their accession to the Union. And it can only avoid the creation of 'spheres of influence', if it offers proper scope for membership throughout Wider Europe. Even if Russia and other countries are not interested in EU accession, by holding out the possibi-

lity of membership, the EU shows that it is open to creating common goods. Since the last enlargement round, the EU has somehow contrived to turn its enlargement policy into something approaching a policy of exclusion. The Union needs to reinvent it as a policy of inclusion.

If it is to have a coherent strategy, the EU must clarify the enlargement debate along three principles:

1. Europe extends as far as the members of the Council of Europe, plus those countries currently excluded for political reasons, as well as others that may be recognised as independent in that same space in the future.
2. Within such geographical limits, any country prepared to meet the Copenhagen criteria, which can be reinforced if necessary, should be eligible for enlargement.
3. Unlike the EU accession perspective, which must be maintained under all circumstances, both the conditions for achieving an accession perspective and the negotiation processes are reversible. Reversals can only be justified by a failure to meet the respective criteria.

What should a Wider Europe project deal with?

If these are the political conditions for a successful Wider Europe policy, what should this actually deal with? Wider Europe is, by definition, a project that cannot be initiated by the European Union alone. It requires the involvement of governments of the entire European space and, ideally, their societies, too. The EU should be ambitious in its formulation, proactive in its implementation and generous in sharing the leadership with non-EU partners. The positive elements of enlargement and neighbourhood – the bilateral dimension and

the action plans – should be maintained, and initiatives such as the Northern Dimension, the Baltic and Danube Macroregions and the Black Sea Synergy should be part of it. Additionally, there are at least four areas that could consolidate a Wider Europe:

1. A renewed debate about security in Europe is overdue. To this end, the EU should engage not only with Russia, but with Turkey and all other European states (as well as providing for some form of participation for the USA). The imperative of avoiding competition for influence in an overlapping neighbourhood and achieving peace and stability means that the EU has to open new spaces for collaboration. Rather than a comprehensive treaty as proposed by President Medvedev in 2008, any security dialogue should proceed topic by topic, improving the climate with achievements in specific issues, such as non-conventional threats, joint military missions, missile defence, conflict resolution or the treatment of partially or non-recognised independent territories.
2. The key to revitalising the European Union's image and influence in the Western Balkans was the facilitation and eventual liberalisation of the visa regime – despite the unsustainable, unfair and counterproductive exclusion of Kosovo. The Western Balkans have shown how conditionality and technical rigour can deliver a mutually profitable result as well as a tangible improvement for citizens. The Eastern Partnership countries have indicated that visa-free travel is a priority for them, one of the few rewards to offer their populations as they undertake EU-inspired reforms, even without a clear membership perspective. Turkey and Russia also attach high priority to this issue.

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Roadmaps for visa liberalisation should therefore be progressively offered to all countries in Europe. The maintenance of a strong technical focus will ensure that the process is not captured by inward-looking EU debates and polemic domestic agendas, and visa-free movement within Europe can thus be achieved in a fair manner. No other step would bring the idea of a Wider Europe closer to the citizens.

3. The quality of democracy in Europe is currently addressed in two separate debates. The first concerns worrying phenomena inside the EU such as populism, corruption and the disconnect of politicians from their voters. It is largely societal and has little institutional consequence. The other debate involves an extremely strict and intrusive form of conditionality for EU accession candidates to a lax sort in the case of Russia. Connecting both strands in a Wider European context is likely to be unpopular amongst EU governments. But it could revitalise the role of the Union as well as of pan-European organisations, and link them directly with civil society in pursuit of a European project in times of growing Euro-pessimism. This means engaging in pan-European debates that affect EU countries and non-EU countries alike (for instance on Roma issues or on the rights of Muslim communities) and in universal issues such as the independence of the judiciary, corruption, homophobia and freedom of the press.

4. Finally, the EU should rethink the way it sees itself in the European context. A less unipolar approach, underpinned by a more open enlargement policy, would certainly be a start. But the idea of securing Europe solely via enlargement (let alone neighbourhood) policy is not going to

of all European countries subject to a strict but fair conditionality should be accompanied by the unequivocal respect of the Union and its members towards other freely chosen courses of action. Given that the EU-27 make up a large proportion of the OSCE and the Council of Europe, these institutions represent important platforms for EU member states' own diplomacies to step in should the EU's rigid negotiating formats frustrate the Union's European partners.

In short: the Union's approach of dividing Eastern and South Eastern Europe into neighbours and future candidates, giving Eastern neighbours ambiguous perspectives, and of dealing with Russia along the lines of separate EU policies at the expense of a comprehensive Wider Europe vision is less and less sustainable. It is, moreover, less likely to succeed as the EU becomes less attractive and no longer offers the only desirable future for all European countries. Neighbourhood policy, if thoroughly reformed, could of course be maintained for the Maghreb and Middle East. But only a Wider Europe could help reinvigorate European integration, reactivate enlargement as a viable policy, stabilise the European continent, and anchor Turkey and Russia to the European space as well as reconnecting with EU citizens in a call to strengthen democracy throughout the continent.

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