

Impact of the ‘Big bang’ enlargement on EU foreign policy – 10 years on

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New horizons, new sensitivities

The European Union’s leap from 15 to 25 members (and later to 28) was supposed to have consigned the Cold War legacy of separate and hostile camps in Eastern and Western Europe to the shelves of history. The fault lines that opened up across Europe in 2003 over the war in Iraq were therefore ominous signs for the development of a cohesive EU foreign policy after the fifth enlargement of the Union envisaged for 2004. All Central and Eastern European candidate countries signed letters supporting the US policy to ‘disarm’ Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The position of the majority of Western European states, Germany and France in particular, was one of emphatically rejecting the impending war. Divisions were deepened by French President Jacques Chirac, who noted that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe had “lost a good opportunity to keep quiet”, calling their support for the US “infantile” and “reckless”. There was even an implicit threat that they might have their EU accession blocked by a French referendum. Although the other member states and the European Commission rejected Chirac’s criticism, the incident reinforced US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s evocation of ‘old’ and ‘new’ Europe. The take-home message for the EU-15 was that the aspiring members would bring along their own sensitivities and stand up for their own interests.

For those states not already members of NATO and the EU, the effects of the fall of the Iron Curtain were particularly dramatic as they all had to deal with the insecurities of internal transition – and some even with disintegration and war. For many Central and Eastern European states, the practical response to these predicaments was first a move towards NATO – thereby affirming the transatlantic link to the hard power of the US – and then towards the EU – the best method to address myriad soft security challenges.

The dual enlargement has contributed to the stability of a large swath of Central and Eastern Europe. Contrary to the prevailing message, however, EU enlargement has in some cases heightened security concerns. With the south-eastward push of its external borders, the European Union has imported the frozen conflict over Cyprus, pitching it more sharply against Turkey, and it has been confronted more directly with hard security threats emanating from the (new) neighbourhoods: from tensions over Kosovo’s independence and

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bursts of violence in the South Caucasus to the slaughter in Syria. The worries in the Baltic States and Poland about the stand-off with Russia over Ukraine also show that the stability of EU territory remains vulnerable at the edges. By the same token, the EU's 'big bang' enlargement has compounded softer security challenges such as illegal immigration, organised crime and the disruption of the flow of energy resources, to name just a few.

Within the EU, the last decade has been characterised by a sense of transition and political tension over the failed Constitutional Treaty, the economic and financial crisis, the nature of external border security, the new foreign policy architecture established by the Lisbon Treaty and differing visions of the EU's external relations, including the future of EU enlargement. The addition of 10+2+1 new member states has affected how the EU perceives and tackles these and other issues, thereby shaping the European Union's foreign policy role overall.

Impact of enlargement on leadership and decision-making

Whereas it is now safe to say that the innovations of the Lisbon Treaty have strengthened the EU's visibility and efficiency of decision-making in the realm of external action, the successive enlargements since 2004 have nevertheless complicated the Union's political balance. The Big 3 – France, Germany and the UK – continue to play a crucial role in the Union's foreign and security policy-making, as their efforts to spearhead a resolution of the nuclear dispute with Iran demonstrates. At the next level down, Italy and Spain have been joined by Poland as another 'large state' demanding a seat at the top table. In certain domains (e.g. Ukraine), the Weimar Triangle has allowed Poland to steer EU foreign policy alongside France and Germany. Together with Sweden, Poland also tabled the plan for an Eastern dimension to the European Neighbourhood Policy, presenting it as a path towards EU membership – thereby truly envisaging the stated aim of the ENP, i.e. the eradication of new dividing lines on the continent after the 2004 enlargement. While the initiative for an Eastern Partnership immediately drew criticism from Bulgaria and Romania, which did not want to see the Union's Black Sea Synergy undermined, the Commission and the Czech Republic threw their weight behind the plan, which led to the inaugural summit of the Eastern Partnership in Prague in May 2009, during the Czech rotating Presidency of the Council.

Dominated by bans on foodstuff, plans for a missile shield and energy shortages, the political climate in EU-Russia relations has seen a dramatic drop in temperature since 2004. This was to a considerable extent the result of a more assertive attitude adopted by the EU under the influence of some new member states from Central and Eastern Europe. Gradually, older member states have hardened their positions as well. Yet, dealing with Putin's Russia remains emblematic for the division among member states, even among the new ones. Countries like Slovakia and Bulgaria have different cultural, economic and political sensitivities towards Russia from those felt by the Baltic States and Poland. Geographical proximity and cross-border trade or minority issues condition the approaches to Russia in several and diverse ways. This goes to show that there is no Central and Eastern European 'bloc' within the EU. At best, there are changing coalitions around the 'Visegrad 4' (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia).

As the majority of new member states can be classified as 'small states', their interests and sensitivities within foreign policy decision-making have been uploaded to the EU level, especially during the rotating Presidencies. Cases in point are Slovenia and Hungary's focus on the Western Balkans, Cyprus's attention to the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and Lithuania's ambition to turn Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia away from Russia and into the arms of the EU.

Given their shared history under the Soviet yoke, the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe have more reason than most to be wary of Moscow's intentions and actions. This has translated in their markedly western orientation, which has tipped the internal balance of the CFSP/CSDP in an Atlanticist direction. New member states have been increasingly engaged in civilian and military crisis-management operations under the EU flag. As a rule they have done so as modular components of bigger multinational units and under foreign command. Much as their contributions have been limited in time, scope and numbers, the new member states have proved their willingness and ability to participate and perform in CSDP operations, especially in the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood, but also further afield.

Impact

In size, scope and character, the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004 was nothing like the previous accession waves and it is unlikely to be anything similar of those in the future. The (by now not so) new member states have brought their own preferences and interests to bear, thereby complicating in some cases the already-fractured foreign and security policies of the EU. Despite the nuances that persist among the latest entrants, the enlargement rounds of the last decade have introduced an undisputedly new eastern dimension to the EU's foreign policy, a more encompassing and at the same time more assertive *Ostpolitik* than the one sought by Willy Brandt in the 1970s. Today's blurring distinctions between internal and external policies and between hard and soft security demands a more holistic and inclusive approach in tackling challenges and seizing opportunities if the EU is to make good on its foreign policy objectives. In this respect, the experience and expertise of the (by now not so) new member states has been and will continue to be indispensable for the European Union.



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