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From Neighbors to Potential Members: Is the War in Ukraine a Critical Juncture for the European Union's Enlargement Policy?

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Abstract In the aftermath of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (the Associated Trio) immediately submitted their applications for membership of the European Union (EU). In response to the Associated Trio's formal membership applications, the EU granted candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine in 2022 and to Georgia in 2023. In doing so, the EU has made clear that it is prepared to offer more than symbolic solidarity to neighbors invaded or threatened by Russian aggression. This article critically examines the implications of the war in Ukraine for EU enlargement policy. It seeks to determine whether the inclusion of the Associated Trio in the enlargement agenda symbolizes a shift in the EU's overall approach to enlargement. This article uses historical institutionalism's critical juncture concept as a theoretical framework. Throughout the study, a qualitative method is used to analyze the EU's official documents and the available literature in a descriptive and interpretive way. The article concludes that the EU's decision to rethink its long-fatigued enlargement policy following the war in Ukraine appears to be a critical juncture that holds the potential to shape the future landscape of enlargement.

Keywords European Union · Enlargement Policy · War in Ukraine · Associated Trio

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From Neighbors to Potential Members: Is the War in Ukraine a Critical Juncture for the European Union's Enlargement Policy?

Since its emergence in 2014, the Ukraine crisis has posed many challenges for the European Union (EU). It has led to many policy reconfigurations, especially in the areas of trade, aid, energy, and external relations (Moravcsik, 2016). For example, in this new context, the end of the EU's high dependence on Russian energy sources has become a matter of urgency for the EU's energy policy (Stockemer, 2023). After the escalation of the crisis into a war in 2022, the challenges posed by the crisis have had a major impact on EU foreign policy. More fundamentally, the crisis has had important consequences for the EU's enlargement policy.

The EU's enlargement potential has been negatively constrained in the last two decades, when the Union has been in a constant struggle to cope with several simultaneous or successive crises, such as the debt crisis, the migration crisis and Brexit, which has also been defined as a situation of polycrises (Rhinard, 2019; Zeitlin, Nikoli & Laffan, 2019). Meanwhile, the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU has been marked by a number of less remarkable decisions, which have meant limited progress toward membership in general. With the war in question, the EU decided to launch a new enlargement wave involving three old Eastern Partnership countries, also known as the "Associated Trio." What happened in the long-forgotten area of enlargement was not only unprecedented but also a great surprise, especially after Croatia became the last country to join the EU in 2013. Following this historic decision, the ongoing EU membership process was also discussed.

The aim of this study is to determine to what extent the Ukrainian war has caused a change in the EU enlargement policy in terms of agenda and methodology by using descriptive and interpretative qualitative methods. To improve the understanding of developments in enlargement policy after the Ukranian war, this article uses a theoretical framework based on the critical concept of historical institutionalism. In this way, by linking its research agenda with its conceptual framework, the study elaborates on the research question 'Does the EU's response to the new realities in its neighborhood mean a shift in the European Union's enlargement policy after the war in Ukraine?'.

The article proceeds as follows. First, the concept of critical juncture is presented in such a way as to show that it is a useful tool for analyzing foreign policy changes during crises and for opening up political space for these changes. Second, the dominant dynamics of the EU enlargement process before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine were presented as states of fatigue. Third, the developments in EU enlargement after the war in Ukraine were identified. Fourth, the factors and developments covered in the previous two sub-titles are discussed comparatively from the perspective of critical junctures. Finally, the study concludes by stressing that despite some unexpected decisions to include new countries in the EU's enlargement agenda after the war in Ukraine, it is still too early to define the war as a critical juncture because of uncertainties about the next steps in creating a new path.

A Tool for Understanding Change: The Critical Juncture Concept

> Although we are living in a period of unprecedented change,
> our understanding of change is very inferior to our understanding
> of fundamental long-term regularities (Keohane, 2008)

The critical juncture is one of the few concepts in political science that has been mobilized for the study of moments of political change that lead political agencies to rethink prevailing institutional configurations. In general, it defines a moment in time that brings about a wholesale questioning of the status quo by weakening the oppressive limits of structural constraints that have operated as mechanisms offering legitimacy to the status quo of previous critical juncture and prevented action to make a new beginning (Ewing & Krawatzek, 2022; Ikani, 2021; Soifer, 2012). With the integration of this concept into Historical Institutionalism[1], the theory has largely escaped accusations of being a theory of continuity with a poor capacity to understand change (Sorensen, 2023).

The critical juncture concept was developed by Lipset and Rokkan in 1967 in their study of comparative politics (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). However, the first comprehensive statement of the concept is made by Collier and Collier (1991), in which a critical juncture is defined as a period of significant change that typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries. In the aftermath of this study, the use of the concept by academics expanded (Capoccia, 2016). In the later conceptualizations of the critical juncture concept, especially in the ones made after the turn of century, the significance given to the interests, ideas, emotions, discourse, and agency was enhanced (Smith, 2021).

Critical junctures cannot be considered the only source of change because some antecedent conditions generally play a causal role in the outcomes of critical junctures (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). This means that critical junctures generally operate with some critical antecedents that act as factors or conditions that increase the pressure for change when a critical juncture emerges. They lead actors to believe that they are reaching a certain threshold (Slater & Simmons, 2010). The events or developments identified as critical junctures may occur as a result of both exogenous and indigenous factors, or because of the combination and interaction of the two (Hogan, 2019).

By focusing on the criticality of particular junctures, the concept distinguishes between historical moments. The critical juncture is identified as a moment that produces long-term and transformative effects. Others are classified as historical moments that ensure the continuation of the existing order (Soifer, 2012). The destructive effects of these times in terms of dominant ideas, legitimacy approaches, or framing attempts, or their radical consequences on the established order, reflecting an equilibrium achieved after a choice of path at a past moment of critical juncture, motivate us to identify them as crisis situations (Donatella et al, 2020; Hogan 2019). As a result, critical junctures are often associated with sudden and transformative change rather than incremental change through ongoing adjustments and adaptations (Sorensen, 2023). In these moments, existing institutional mechanisms are seen as inadequate to handle the situation at hand (Ikani, 2021).

The choice made at the moment of a critical juncture generally has important future outcomes and may even precipitate later crises (Haydu, 1998; Mahoney, 2001). The legitimacy of existing institutions is undermined during critical junctures. This creates openings for entrepreneurs to reshape existing institutions and encourages the emergence of new innovative arrangements, which generally mean a significant divergence from the past (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Katznelson, 2014; Berntzen, 2020; Krisch & Yıldız, 2023). Critical junctures are the choice points at which a particular option is adopted from two or more alternatives (Mahoney, 2001). These junctures are critical because once an option is selected, it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives are still available (Mahoney, 2022). Critical junctures lead to the elimination of some previous alternatives by making them less legitimate

[1] A political theory that argues that the timing and sequence of events shape political processes.

and attractive in the eyes of agency (Hogan, 2019). Pierson explains the period following a critical juncture through the mechanism of the "lock-in effect," whereby a process of path dependency that shapes the subsequent trajectory operates in a way that makes alternative structures less likely to triumph (Pierson, 2004). Therefore, critical junctures are also path-creating moments. A new path is created, and path dependency is formed.

Enlargement of the EU before the War in Ukraine: Living in a State of Fatigue

There has been a widespread view that the EU has been suffering from severe enlargement fatigue since the completion of the 2004 and 2007 big bang enlargements (O'Brennan, 2014). It has been widely argued that the achievement of EU membership by many members before getting ready and fully prepared for accession played a crucial role in the emergence of this enlargement fatigue (Szołucha, 2010). Enlargement fatigue, however, is as old as EU enlargement itself. It is not a new phenomenon nor specific to the period following the big bang enlargement. France's reluctance to British membership in the 1960s, in view of its potential influence on EU integration, was the first expression of enlargement fatigue (O'Brennan, 2014).

The reason for both the emergence and deepening of this problem was once again frequently identified as the absorption capacity, which refers to the EU's ability to absorb new member states institutionally, procedurally and materially without creating problems in the pace and functioning of the integration process (Emerson et al, 2006; Börzel, Dimitrova & Schimmelfennig, 2017). From this perspective, enlargement has been framed as a risk with the potential to upset the delicate balance of the European construction, notably through the disruption of its internal cohesion with the integration of new members into the decision-making structures (Sjursen, 2012). These growing concerns and prejudices about the forthcoming enlargements led to the dominance of the intergovernmental approach in the accession process and was described by Hillion (2010) as the creeping nationalization of EU enlargement. At the time of Albania's application for membership in 2009, Germany indicated that it would not allow a request for an opinion from the Commission until there was formal approval by the Bundestag (Emerson & Blockmans, 2022). Additionally, the increasing number of benchmarks, each of which required unanimous approval, slowed the pace of accession.

The stalemate of the last two decades is making it difficult to claim that the enlargement lies at the very core of EU integration. Enlargement, which has been told as a success story or as the EU's most powerful foreign policy tool, has lost much of its salience (Grabbe, 2006). Politicians talked on it less, and issues related to enlargement found limited space in EU decision-making processes under pressure from Euroskeptic movements (Economides, Featherstone & Hunter, 2024). The rising negative feelings associated with the enlargement pushed the EU to find a way to hold the enlargement process at a slow pace, without realizing the ideal of membership; therefore, accession became a tool rather than a goal (Domaradzki, 2023). In other words, after its big bang enlargement, the EU has changed significantly, both in terms of policy content and institutional set-up, and this new EU has decided to relate to its new members with instruments that mean less than accession. The accession countries (including Turkey and the Western Balkans) have been negatively affected by their exposure to the EU operating under the influence of enlargement fatigue. Enlargement fatigue has undermined membership credibility in potential members' eyes. It has also destroyed their willingness to reform to conform to EU standards (Szołucha, 2010). Because of the continuing stalemate in the accession process, progress reports became stagnation reports. They have also been officially renamed as "country reports."

After the deadlock in the EU's enlargement policy, the Union designed new policy alternatives, such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP), to build closer ties with neighboring countries, many of which were post-Soviet states, and achieve stability in its immediate neighborhood without offering the promise of membership (Eriş, 2012). Neither of these tools did not create a significant improvement in the picture by making the region more stable (Dabrowski, 2022). Partnership and Association Agreements have been signed with these countries in order to strengthen their ties to the EU. In addition, the citizens of these countries enjoy visa-free movement within the EU. That means there were political, economic, and social ties have already been operating between the parties. As far as the alignment of these countries with EU standards is concerned, such intensive cooperation with the EU has remained poor and slow. It has even been argued that the EU's choice of this kind of policy approach has left the region vulnerable to Russian influence and aggression, leaving it as a gray zone between Russia and Europe (Karjalainen, 2023).

When the EU was under influence enlargement fatigue, the pace of enlargement slowed down and enlargement policy lost its credibility and consistency. This paved the way for anti-EU narratives, democratic backsliding, and illiberal developments in the accession countries (Bechev, 2022). After observing the negative effects of this fatigue, the EU took several steps to give the faltering enlargement policy a kiss of life. It has adopted a new or revised methodology, aimed, in particular, at ending the delays in democratization in the Western Balkans by 2020. Within this new methodology, the main innovation was the grouping of the enlarged chapters into 6 clusters with the aim of working on all chapters simultaneously. Among the clusters, the political criteria cluster was defined as the primus inter pares, the first to be opened and the last to be closed, thus setting the pace of the whole process. However, despite its initial intention of making EU enlargement policy more credible, predictable and dynamic, the new methodology has not resulted in a fundamental change in the accession process. The policy continued to suffer from a high degree of unpredictability, a lack of a tailor-made approach, and a lack of coherence between negotiating chapters (Jaćimović & Shaipova, 2023).

Enlargement of the EU after the War in Ukraine

After the failure of its neo-imperial attempts to peacefully establish control over the internal and external affairs of post-Soviet countries with the past twin enlargements of the EU and NATO (Rabinovych & Pintsch, 2024), Russia launched an invasion campaign against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (also known as the Associated Trio after signing a joint memorandum to promote the cooperation among themselves and with the EU), as former participants of the EU's EaP mechanism, including no membership perspective, submitted their membership applications to the EU within a week of this invasion campaign.

The EU's first formal response to the appeals of the Associated Trio, which were former Eastern partners, came with the Versailles Declaration on 11 March. The declaration gave the green light for the examination of the applications of the Associated Trio, stated that the Council recognized the European aspirations and the European choice of them and invited the Commission to present its opinion on these applications in accordance with the relevant provisions of the treaties for all three countries (European Council, 2022a). This was the beginning of a new chapter in EU relations.

Just three months after the Associated Trio applied for membership, the European Commission produced opinions in 17 June 2022, including an assessment of the capacity of each country to meet the criteria for EU

membership set by the European Councils of Copenhagen in 1993 and Madrid in 1995 (European Commission, 2022a). The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (2022a), concluded the official presentation of the Opinions in the following manner: 'We all know that Ukrainians are ready to die from the European perspective. We want them to live with us in the European dream.

The EU has acted with unprecedented speed on membership applications in four months, with the European Council of 23-24 June granting official candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and a European perspective to Georgia (European Council, 2022b). In the Commission's opinion, left-behind Georgia was invited to achieve a better level in terms of political criteria through reforms related to judicial independence, media freedoms, anticorruption, de-oligarchization of state and economy, and overcoming political polarization (European Commission, 2022a). Georgia was also declared a candidate for EU membership in December 2023, following the adoption of expected reform measures (European Council, 2023a).

The war in Ukraine served as a catalyst, prompting the EU to take urgent action and reaction. The EU has demonstrated that when necessary, it can act with great speed. The Baltic countries, Sweden and Poland, played a crucial role in the process with their strong support for the accession process of the Associated Trio (Dubský, Kočí & Votoupalová, 2024). In the history of EU enlargement, no other country has been awarded candidate status as fast as Ukraine or Moldova, less than four months upon application. The politics rather than the technocratic approach prevailed in the decisions on the accession of the Associated Trio. The provision of a membership perspective to them did not happen because of their good record of reforms; instead, it happened as an expression of the EU's geopolitical reaction to the changing security environment in Europe. In other words, with its decision, the EU sent a strong signal to Russia to end its aggression and strengthen its position as a stability promoter (Lippert, 2022).

In this rapid mobilization, a high level of empathy with Ukrainian people, both at the political and public levels, played a crucial role. Accordingly, the tendency to view Ukraine as a member of the European family and its attack as an attack on the whole family is widespread among European political elites and publics (Kaveshnikov, 2022). The President of the European Commission also made an emotional statement about Ukraine in September 2022: 'You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you.' Besides, in the same statement, the President also underlined the necessity of fighting for democracy, because, from her perspective, what was happening in Ukraine was part of a larger confrontation between democracy and autocracy (Leyen, 2022b). Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its disregard for international law are linked to the ongoing debate about the transformation of the international system, which is driven primarily by challenges to the liberal world order, particularly the rise and growth of nondemocratic states (Cross & Karolewski, 2017). In this process, Russia has been framed as a common and imminent threat and foe posing a challenge the EU, to the security of its citizens, its core principles and values, including democracy, and the European model, and this has provided a narrative for the new round of enlargement (European Council, 2022a; Härtel, 2024).

The rapid decisions on the membership of the Associated Trio to the EU without asking for fulfilling many conditions, combined with the unfulfilled membership hopes of years, caused frustration at the side of Western Balkan countries (Camille, 2022; Belle, 2022). Moreover, the EU's declining credibility became even more problematic as China and Russia sought to assert their influence in the region through their own plans and visions (Gaarmann, 2023; Alesina, 2022). As a result, the EU was under the obligation of making decisions to boost the long-forgotten accession processes of the Western Balkans. In this vein, Albania and North Macedonia made progress in the accession negotiation, with the initiation of an acquis screening process

(European Commission, 2022b), and Bosnia and Herzegovina gained candidate status in 2022 (General Affairs Council, 2022). The decision for Bosnia and Herzegovina was also taken despite the country's limited progress in reforms related to EU accession. In the same year, Kosovo achieved the long-awaited ideal of visa liberalization. Furthermore, the EU-Western Balkan summit occurred in Tirana on December 6, 2022. The Union held a high-profile meeting outside its territory for the first time. It was intended to signal its strong commitment to the region (European Commission, 2022c).

Recent Enlargement Developments from a Critical Juncture Perspective

As mentioned above, the aim of this study was to examine the war in Ukraine as a critical juncture that motivated the Associated Trio to apply for EU membership. Under this title, the dynamics of EU enlargement are examined by comparing the period before and after the war in Ukraine and by applying the theoretical mindset offered by the concept of critical juncture.

The EU's response to the membership aspirations of the Associated Trio was shaped by several antecedent conditions. First, the EU has been always very sensitive to changing geopolitical realities since the inception of the integration (Samadashvili, 2022). For example, the EU reacted to the end of the Cold War by adopting the famous Maastricht Treaty, including the institutionalization of foreign policy cooperation under the framework of a common foreign and security policy, and by launching a big bang enlargement aiming to end the Cold War division of Europe. Second, when Russia attacked Georgia in 2008 and recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent entities or invaded Crimea of Ukraine in 2014 by acting against the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the EU did not show a strong reaction (Karjalainen, 2023). For instance, the EU's response to Russia's incursion into Georgia was to develop the EaP as part of the ENP. After several ENP revisions, the EU finally concluded that security threats in the neighborhood and the return of geopolitics to Europe made it impossible to continue with the ENP (Ikani, 2019). This may be because the EU's weak response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its continued aggression against Ukraine in the Donbass, is seen as a factor in Russia launching a full-scale war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022 (Rabinovych & Pintsch, 2024). Third, from the outset, EU member states, such as Poland, Sweden and Germany, have long been of the opinion that there should be a political distinction between the EU's approach to its eastern and southern neighbors (Ikani, 2021). Therefore, the eastern and southern components of the ENP have very different dynamics. While the possibility of EU membership was not formally promised to eastern neighbors, such a possibility was clearly not on the horizon for southern neighbors (Elsuwegeand & Loo, 2017). Hence, the Ukraine may have been considering this application before the war, but the war created an additional motivation and made this application an urgent one for Ukraine. This critical move by Ukraine has made membership application a necessity for the other two members of the Associated Trio facing the Russian threat. Therefore, an expected change can be observed that has been discussed for years. What is unexpected is the EU attitude, which is a symbol of a larger change, as there is a shift from neighborhood policy to enlargement policy.

Until the war, the EU remained highly reluctant to consider eastern enlargement, and there was also a high level of reluctance about the ongoing enlargement processes, including the Western Balkan countries and the Turkiye. Despite the EU member states' declarative dedication to the enlargement agenda, enlargement did not turn into an issue of EU priority (Jaćimović & Shaipova, 2023). The Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 changed the cost-benefit calculations for enlargement in EU capitals. Urgent security imperatives, which have been operating at the expense of the EU's comfort zone, have forced EU member states to gather their political will and make long-awaited decisions in the field of enlargement. In other words, the ice of the

enlargement stalemate has finally broken. For the first time after the completion of the big bang enlargement in 2007, 2022 became the most eventful year for EU enlargement. EU member states, willingly or unwillingly, have taken historical decisions that represent a radical change from previous positions. Moreover, what is happening at the political level is also supported by European publics, and it can even be argued that this change in public attitudes toward enlargement has enabled leaders to make these critical decisions (Nakashidze, 2024).

A new type of framing, which led EU leaders to question the legitimacy of previously chosen institutional mechanisms for dealing with Russia both globally and in the common neighborhood, emerged after the war in Ukraine. The Versailles Declaration, issued after the informal meetings of EU leaders on 11 March 2022, underlined that "Russia's war of aggression constitutes a tectonic shift in European history." (European Commission, 2022a). By approaching the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the largest armed conflict in Europe since the end of the Second World War, from the perspective of global power competition and the return of war to the European continent, the EU came to the point of not only responding to Russian aggression in Ukraine but also to Russia, who is a geopolitical rival and a common foe, aiming to establish a so-called sphere of influence in order to maintain control over the future shape of the international system (European Union, 2022). Since then, it has become urgent for the EU to regain its lost status as a transformative power by rethinking the Union's role in its neighborhood and on a global level.

According to the critical juncture theoretical framework, what comes next after a critical moment is the construction of a new path. With the official decisions taken for integrating the Associated Trio into the enlargement agenda, the Union made a very quick start (Kaveshnikov, 2022). From now on, the EU has to support its new position by taking further steps and demonstrating its political will. Otherwise, this moment, which still has the value of being a critical juncture, has the potential to turn into a simple political gesture. Forging a new path, which is long, would undoubtedly pose significant challenges for the EU. In 2023, EU leaders gathered in Granada to mark the start of the process to define the Union's general political directions and priorities for the years to come, setting a strategic course of action to shape our common future for the benefit of all. In this meeting, enlargement was stressed as a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity (European Council, 2023b).

The EU is not ready for a rapid enlargement on the basis of geopolitical grounds, as it ignores the shortcomings of the accession countries. The integration continues to have many internal problems, and member states continued to have different views about the direction of the integration process (Domaradzki, 2023). There are still EU member states, such as France, reluctant to further enlarge the Union, or at least to enlarge without deepening (Sapir, 2022). These member states can put forward political proposals that could be an alternative to enlargement with a looser level of integration, which means more than association but less than membership. There is also a debate over staged membership (Anghel & Džankić, 2023). These measures can reduce the opposition of reluctant member states and lessen the need for reform of existing policies and benefits (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2017).

Conclusion

The EU has often used its enlargement policy as a geopolitical tool in the past, notably when it expanded to the post-Soviet countries of Central and Eastern Europe or when it decided to ensure stability in the Western Balkans after the break-up of Yugoslavia. In other words, the EU has used enlargement decisions to respond urgently to major international developments in its neighborhood. Therefore, the EU's response

to Russia's attack on Ukraine can be seen as a clear expression of the old reflex. With the long-awaited membership applications from the Associated Trio arriving a few weeks after the attack, the Union decided to rethink its relations with them and made an institutional shift in relations, moving them from neighborhood policy to enlargement policy. Beyond this critical institutional shift is the predominance of a long fatigue in the enlargement sphere before its revival after the war in Ukraine. It would be the first time for the EU to manage two enlargement rounds, namely the Western Balkans and the Associated Trio, which include two regions with diverse historical, societal and geopolitical influences. In the aftermath of the landmark decisions on enlargement, which, at least for the time being, appear to be a critical juncture, it is now time to chart a new course in order to once again repeat the successful transformation stories of EU enlargement.

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