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# Enlargement Lesson from the Schengen Zone – What can the Western Balkan Countries Learn?

In this opinion article, we aim to draw a parallel between the enlargement of the Schengen area and of the European Union itself. We will argue that both processes suffer from enlargement fatigue, and some of the impeding factors are identical.

The Schengen area is one of the most ambitious and innovative feature of the European Union. It started as an agreement between a few countries outside the formal framework of the EU, and became a core program and one of the main achievements of the integration. The abolishment of national borders and the delegation of external border controls challenge the long-established conceptions of sovereignty, territoriality and security.<sup>2</sup> At the same time the EU itself is so dynamic and so novel, it constitutes a political-economic-social-cultural system without precedent and blueprint.

When the Schengen zone was created, even the idea that one day countries from beyond the Iron Curtain could join the convention was utopian. However, history made this utopia a reality. In 2007 almost every Central and Eastern European newcomers joined the area. 2007 is also the year when Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union with the hope of entering the Schengen area as soon as possible.

The benefits of the Schengen zone are evident from more point of view. The migration crisis of 2015 inspired many analyses to quantify the costs of losing these achievements. Even if the elimination of the Schengen borders primarily facilitates the free movement of persons, according to the estimates of various studies, trade is the biggest beneficiary of the borderless zone, ahead of the commuters and tourism. The Schengen area create trade among the members with smaller expenses and less uncertainty for exporters. It provides easier and shorter travel for passengers, higher growth potential for border regions and new job market opportunities. Quantifying all of these benefits<sup>3</sup> helps us to get a picture of the possible costs of “non-Schengen”. To see the order of magnitude, it is worth comparing it to the possible collapse of the euro, where even in the most optimistic scenario, the costs would be at least a hundredfold.<sup>4</sup> However, it is absolutely

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<sup>2</sup> ZAIOTTI 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See FELBERMAYR et al. 2018: 335–351; BÖHMER et al. 2016; DAVIS–GIFT 2014: 1541–1557.

<sup>4</sup> SCHIMMELFENNING 2018: 969–989.

important to point out that the Schengen area involves additional ideal and political benefits that are difficult to quantify. The loss of the Schengen acquis could thus endanger the European integration process itself.

Bulgaria and Romania have successfully completed the Schengen evaluation process and in November 2022, the Commission adopted a Communication on Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia calling upon the Council to take the necessary decisions without any further delay, allowing these three Member States to join the area. In a vote on 18 October 2022, MEPs reiterated their call for both countries to be admitted to the Schengen area as soon as possible, stressing that free movement is at the heart of the EU project. However, the Council opened the door only for Croatia but left Romania and Bulgaria still outside. EU national governments must unanimously decide to allow new States to enter the border-free zone and two countries did not agree.

The reasons for the two vetoing countries, Austria and the Netherlands, were not of an economic nature. Their concerns date back to the very beginning of Eastern enlargement, when “in Western Europe, fear of tanks and missiles from beyond the Iron Curtain was replaced by concern about uncontrolled immigration and cross-border crime”.<sup>5</sup> The query about the willingness and ability of poorly paid Eastern European police forces and frontier guards “to combat a trade that often gives them some share in the profits”<sup>6</sup> seems to be evergreen. The Netherlands opposed Bulgarian accession due to the country’s “deficiencies in the rule of law” and its uncertain domestic political situation. Austria’s main argument for excluding Romania and Bulgaria from Schengen is that the zone is no longer able to cope with migration from the Western Balkans. Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency reported 128,000 “irregular entries” from the Western Balkans by October 2022, a 77% increase compared to 2021. At the same time, during January–November 2023 the Western Balkan route saw the biggest annual drop among the major migratory routes, with the number of irregular crossings falling 28% compared to the same period in 2022.<sup>7</sup> Anyhow, Romania and Bulgaria are not part of this route. That is why the political leaders of these two countries think that their accession efforts are derailed due to political reasons: the Austrian and Dutch Governments are trying to win over anti-immigration voters.<sup>8</sup> “It is not right to expand a system that is currently not working in many places”, explained Austrian Interior Minister Gerhard Karner.

As Grabbe (2012) points out, it is not only the distrust towards Romania and Bulgaria, we also have to reckon with Greece. Greece is a member of the Schengen area, but has no land border with the rest of the area. It can only be accessed through seaports and airports, which are easier to control. But if Bulgaria and Romania join the zone, human traffickers would go directly from Greece to the Schengen area by land route. And in Greece we have already been disappointed once in terms of keeping the finances in order. So, how can we entrust the integrity of the Schengen zone to Greece? With the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, the two countries would connect the Eastern Mediterranean immigration route with the Western Balkan route on land. As an additional complication,

<sup>5</sup> GRABBE 2000: 520.

<sup>6</sup> GRABBE 2000: 522.

<sup>7</sup> Frontex 2023.

<sup>8</sup> THORPE 2022.



the accession of Romania and Bulgaria is inseparable, because there are no Schengen borders established between the two.

Several crucial questions arise. Is it really the failure and non-readiness of Bulgaria and Romania? Are the vetoes a reflection of Austrian and Dutch internal political pressures instead? Is it the fiasco of the whole community of the Member States not being able to agree? Does the current geopolitical context foster or hinder the extension of the Schengen zone? And last but not least, what does the current accession crisis of the Schengen area teach us about the EU enlargement capacities towards the Western Balkans?

The Western Balkans are geographically at the heart of Europe, surrounded by EU Member States. The EU seems to be fully committed to the integration of the Western Balkans, enough to quote High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell (“The European Union is not complete without the Western Balkans”) or President Ursula von der Leyen (“The future of the Western Balkans is in our Union”). Accession talks are underway with Montenegro and Serbia. The screening process with North Macedonia and Albania has started. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates for EU membership. All six countries have Stabilisation and Association Agreements with the EU. But we hardly see the light at the end of the tunnel. As High Representative Josep Borrell stated at the EU – Western Balkans Summit in December 2023, the Western Balkan enlargement is rather slow, it has to speed up. Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz repeatedly made it clear that it is up to each country that wants to join the EU to decide how quickly that happens.

Both EU and Schengen integration can be interpreted as a Europeanisation process based on conditionality. But if the fulfilment of the conditions does not entail the reward of efforts, i.e. full membership, the political elite and population of the country might become disillusioned with the integration process and turn into Euroscepticism. An unpromising, long lasting and ever postponed enlargement process causes a huge damage, it eliminates the anchoring role of the EU and the divergent forces overcome the converging ones.

The external borders of the Member States and their protection are one of the very basic requirements of their sovereignty, and in order to transfer this, strong trust is (would be) necessary towards the other Member States. Likewise, entering into a so close partnership like EU membership with newcomers from very different economic and cultural background (would) require strong trust. Grabbe (2012) likens trust to oxygen in the EU’s bloodstream, and taking the physiological analogy further, when this trust/oxygen disappears, vital functions begin to shut down. The loss of trust between the Member States (or candidates) at the political level is accompanied by a growing distrust of each other’s institutions. Captured States, corruption and weak institutions are serious problems for a legal community like the European Union, whose members are highly interdependent and are at the mercy of each other in terms of compliance with common rules and regulations.

But who trusts (or doesn’t trust) each other? The Union, the Member States, the countries, the peoples, the Governments, the voters or the politicians? And whose interest is to expand the Schengen area or the European Union itself? As the theory of



public choice<sup>9</sup> emphasises, international agreements are not concluded by States, but by single politicians. The decisions made by international organisations are the decisions of persons influenced by their own personal motivations and lobby interests. In the same way, behind the clashing “national interests” in the Council there are the interests of the current politicians of the current Governments (and the lobby capable of influencing them). The actors of public choice theory do not make decisions based on lofty ideas, or even if it seems so, there must be very specific interests behind them. What the voters and society want, i.e. whether there is a valid social preference about the EU enlargement or about expanding the Schengen area, is highly doubtful. From this point of view, the history of the European Union is the entirety of the decisions made by people along their current interests. These interests sometimes coincide with the direction arising from rational economic benefits. Sometimes, however, other factors steer the motivations of decision-makers in other directions, which are more difficult to quantify.

Nevertheless, even if economic rationality wins, who are the winners? The market? Who are the market? The consumers, the labour force, or most probably the multinational corporations? As Berend (2016) argues, the interests of Western European corporations are inevitable, since their need for a stable and politically safeguarded European market and cheap but skilled labour force made them the largest supporters of deepening and widening the integration. The common currency or the borderless and ever-growing single market became the dominant interest of big business in the European Community since the mid-1980s, as big European corporations started to establish a dense European network of subsidiaries and value chains throughout the Community and a huge lobbying apparatus in parallel. According to Berend (2016), their interests sometimes meet the interests of the nation states who often feel powerless alone in the globalised world and look for joint solutions.

The latest news is about the chance that Romania and Bulgaria are to join the Schengen zone by air and sea by March 2024. “Our adoption in Schengen for the air and sea borders was a matter of restored trust”, said Kiril Petkov, former Prime Minister, leader of Bulgaria’s ruling pro-European We Continue the Change party.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Austrian officials carefully said only that negotiations are continuing.<sup>11</sup>

The Western Balkan countries are far from fulfilling the membership criteria. But what if they speed up and are ready to join? How could the EU prepare to accept them? Romania and Bulgaria are fulfilling the Schengen criteria for years, and still receive pushback. If the Member States cannot enlarge the Schengen area with fellow members who satisfies all the formal expectations, how we can dream about enlarging the EU in the foreseeable future with fragile candidates? We have only possible answers. Since Jean Monnet we know that “Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises”. Let us see how this crisis ends up. And whose interest prevail over the others’.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, VAUBEL 2013: 451–468.

<sup>10</sup> DUNAI 2023.

<sup>11</sup> GREENALL 2023.



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