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“EU Enlargement Policy, Soft Power, Solid Results”

Hard Power/Soft Power in Global Politics Series

The European Union’s enlargement policy is a case in point of the efficiency of soft power to produce solid results. This is the conclusion drawn by Myriam Ferran, Director for Strategy and Turkey at the European Commission. Ferran joined the Commission in 2001 after having worked in the French government for almost a decade. Since then, she has worked with the Commission in various capacities, including in the Directorate-General (DG) for Enlargement, DG for Transport and Energy, DG for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, as well as in the Cabinet of the European Enlargement Commissioner.

Ferran explains that the enlargement policy is based on the power of attraction of the EU. She highlights that the enlargement process is a voluntary one by which sovereign countries apply to join the EU and – based on the application – engage in a set of reforms. These reforms are guided by the membership criteria agreed upon at a European Council meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1993. The Copenhagen criteria, as they have come to be known, focus on three main areas: the political structure of the country, the functioning of its economy, and its legislative alignment with the EU’s *acquis communautaire*, or body of law. The political criteria include having a liberal democracy with rule of law and fundamental human rights guaranteed by the state, an independent judiciary, and civilian control over the military. To meet the economic criteria, a country must have a functioning market economy that is able to withstand competitive pressure from both within and outside the EU. Alignment with the *acquis* involves applying common policies, such as agricultural, sanitary, and electrical standards. By setting these rules, the EU is able to wield its soft power and push for reforms in neighboring countries wanting to join the Union.

The largest accession to date occurred in 2004. A number of Central and Eastern European countries had just left the Iron Curtain and were attracted by the EU for economic development, democracy, and security. The EU had 15 members at the time; the addition of these 10 new member states, including the Mediterranean states of Cyprus and Malta, therefore resulted in an almost doubling in size of the EU. However, increasing the number of member states also meant an increase in the complexity of the EU decision-making process. Additionally, the standards of living were still much lower in the newcomers, which led to fears amongst the older member states of large movements of persons. These fears culminated in 2005 when referendums on a new Constitution for Europe rejected the constitution in both France and the Netherlands. These two refusals came as a shock to the European institutions. Enlargement was largely identified as a scapegoat for the failure on the vote, which led to questions about the EU’s enlargement policy and a reassessment of the enlargement process.

Today, the EU is engaged in a new wave of accession discussions with the Western Balkans. Ferran notes, however, that the enlargement process has differed with these countries due to additional challenges. When the Yugoslav Wars ended in 2001, the societies in these Balkan countries were highly polarized and the newly created states had a deep level of corruption and organized crime. The reforms required of these countries are

therefore societal changes of another magnitude compared to those of the previous candidate countries. European leaders' fear and insecurity around enlargement has also grown compared to 20 years ago, in part because the EU finds itself in a different situation today. The economic and financial crisis in 2008-2009 took years to recover from, and the ongoing migration situation will continue to be a challenge for Europe in years to come. Ferran explains that these additional challenges have dampened the credibility of the enlargement system, leading to a lassitude on both sides. She therefore concludes that the EU's enlargement process is still effective, but that it relies on credibility and the strength of commitment from both parties.