

HCSS Security

Policy Brief: The Role of the Netherlands in EU Enlargement Processes: A Potential Staller to the EU's External Stability

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Introduction

The EU portrays itself as a proponent of global peace. In fact, the European Commission views enlargement as a tool for “reinforcing peace and stability in South East Europe and promoting recovery and reconciliation after the wars of the 1990s” (European Commission, 2014). The most recent enlargement agenda has been promoted by the European Commission’s attempts to incorporate the South Eastern countries within the European Union - namely North Macedonia, the Republic of Kosovo, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.

In this agenda, it is established that “(t)he Western Balkans are part of Europe, geographically surrounded by EU member states, (...) the peoples of the EU and the region have a common heritage and history and a future defined by shared opportunities and challenges” (European Commission, 2018). It also states that expansion toward the Western Balkans is in the Union’s own political, security and economic interest. However, only Serbia and Montenegro are in the midst of accession negotiations, raising questions surrounding the realism of the 2025 goal. Furthermore, the Eurozone crisis and Brexit have caused ‘enlargement fatigue’, straining absorption capacity, whilst raising the question of whether the Union’s priorities should be focused more on internal stability instead of expansion. Shared European objectives may be promoted through soft power, but, in these complex times, placing national objectives at the forefront may likely prove to be the prevailing policy trajectory.

The Netherlands and EU Enlargement Processes

The Netherlands too is experiencing 'enlargement fatigue.' These sentiments are largely visible in the aftermath of 2016 Ukraine referendum, the rise of populism, the rejection of the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in 2018 and the geopolitical interests of other states. In the past, as observed in the enlargement of the Baltic states and Romania and Bulgaria, but also with the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement, the Netherlands has been pro-EU and EU Enlargement. But, even when this was the case, Dutch politicians and media have highlighted negative rather than positive trends (see forthcoming report of the HCSS). Negative trends include corruption, widespread (organized) crime, illegal migration, human rights abuses and political tensions. Potential positive trends were ignored, such as economic gain from open borders, the potential for higher investment, freedom of movement of workers, and so on. The scepticism is even more prevalent now, when combined with 'enlargement fatigue' due to recent events, meaning, that from the outset the new Agenda in 2025, will prove very difficult to sell to the Dutch public, and to implement as envisioned by the European Commission.

The historical analysis of the enlargement processes of the European Union indicates progress in terms of Europe's economic and political stability. For instance, the integration of the Baltic states in the European Union has been viewed as a 'big success' (Anonymous Interview, 2018) at the European level, due to their economic prosperity, and to the security that has been brought to the EU-Russia border, while domestically, corruption has decreased and peace has increased. In fact, EU enlargement was also viewed as a response to the challenging environment of potential conflict (Elsuwege, 2008), and as essential in keeping Russian influence at bay (Gotev, 2014). Despite the budgetary debates and internal fragmentation within the EU, the 2004 boom in eastward enlargement was a success that has been geopolitically and strategically motivated. It also gave the EU more influence in today's multi-polar world (Lane, 2007).

The accession of Bulgaria and Romania presents another case of success despite the lagging on the Copenhagen Criteria, due to institutional legacies, initial socio-economic conditions, domestic factors (such as the rent-seeking elites delaying the transformation process), and choices made during the early stages of democratization (Noutcheva and Bechev, 2008). Scepticism was present in the Dutch public regarding Schengen, corruption and organized crime, lack of rule of law, a fear of uncontrolled entrance of low-skilled Bulgarian and Romanian workers (Marini, 2014; Kalse, 2006), and the acquisition of Romanian citizenship by Moldovans. However, progress has been observed with the integration of the Hungarian minority in Romania, and, more broadly, with the alignment with basic rules of democracy, market and legislation, according to the *acquis* (Noutcheva & Bechev, 2008, p. 116). Bulgaria and Romania's accession was also motivated by geopolitical issues. The United Kingdom assisted in opening the negotiations and the Commission rewarded them for their support in the Kosovo war (Gallagher, 2005, pp. 219–220). Both countries noted 'enlargement fatigue'

in the EU as a whole, as well as new issues coming up on the agenda between them and the EU-25. However, the Accession Treaty was signed in April 2005, confirming the accession year as 2007, although the conditional nature of the agreement was emphasized. Despite the fact that enlargement was seen as neither feasible nor welcome, as the polls after 2004 showed an increasingly negative attitude toward the EU, both countries were accepted later on (Lane, 2007). In fact, the EU membership 'opens their internal transformation rather than marking the end of the story' (Noutcheva & Bechev, 2008, p. 140).

At the time, Bulgarian and Romanian political elites expressed willingness to join the EU. The Union did not view them as trustworthy, yet still allowed them to join. This situation is similar to the situation in South East Europe today. Lessons can be learned as well from this case, as a Dutch parliamentarian stressed that Russian expansion continues and thus, despite difficulties in selling it to the Dutch local population, "it is necessary to keep the enlargement agenda in high priority" (Anonymous Interview, Dutch MP, 2018).

Lastly, the Ukraine referendum marks the expression of Dutch citizens' scepticism toward the European Union, due to widespread corruption in Ukraine and the fear that Ukraine would become an EU member state (Stichting KiezersOnderzoek Nederland, 2016), with 61.1 percent of votes against the Treaty in 2016. However, the low turnout of 32.2 percent decreases the significance of this message (Teffer, 2017). Despite this, the Dutch senate approved the ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement a year later, adding only an explanatory note to the agreement to reflect the result of the referendum. Among the main reasons for the eventual approval from the Dutch was their international reputation as an EU actor, more specifically: their inability or unwillingness to act as a single state against the majority of the EU states, and their need to re-establish their credibility as a trusted ally (Anonymous Interview, 2018). The delayed signature of the Accession Treaty provided success for national populist campaigns, 'and, for a while, it even looked as if the deal wouldn't make it, and that would have been the ultimate foreign policy victory for Russia' (Kanter 2017). The eastern part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is treated as a 'sphere of competition' between EU and Russia. The growing presence of Europe was observed in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, whereas Russia's aim of reclaiming influence was illustrated in the Crimean annexation in 2014, as well as the Georgian war in 2008. The eastern neighbourhood is viewed as "the new front line" between Russia and EU (Ehin and Berg, 2013, p. 117). The consequences of the positive affirmation seem to have shifted the Ukrainian political elite away from Russia and towards the EU. However, their commitment to reforms seems to be low, as criticism is being raised within Ukraine as well as in Brussels. But, economically, Europe can benefit from the treaty, and Europe's soft power can remain strong in its neighbourhood.

The Dutch scepticism with regards to the European Union is not only manifest when it comes to enlargement, but also internally within the Union. The Netherlands has

aligned with Sweden, Denmark and Austria to reject the proposal on higher EU budgetary contributions, which are considered necessary after Brexit and the Greek crisis. Rutte has stressed the independence of the member states and that funds will not be allocated to the European level to assist others that are experiencing difficulties. These sentiments and a general shift away from a pro-EU approach seem to distance the Netherlands from the financial integration that was agreed upon by Germany and France, which indicates an act of counterbalancing.

The Need to Shift Away from a 'Staller' Approach on Enlargement

While historically analysing the enlargements in the past, it becomes apparent that the Netherlands has often delayed the processes. However, a balanced approach prevailed as they only stalled the process, rather than spoiled it. However it is significant to reemphasize that, so far, the European Union, through a joint effort of all member states, has managed to maintain peace and security on the continent. In a multipolar world with new actors present, such as Turkey, Russia and even China, the Union serves as a significant actor that counterbalances their relative power. In addition, the sheer vastness of the economic power of the Union is not to be neglected. Lastly, the soft spheres of influence, such as education, are also to be considered. Therefore, the efforts made towards capacity building in different areas, that, overall, reflect in the processes of maintaining peace and security in Europe and its border, cannot be easily replicated by a single EU member state, irrespective of the sovereign power of that state, as would be the case with the Netherlands.

Therefore, in times of crises for the EU, the Netherlands could assist in ameliorating the image of the EU, but also in promoting liberal democracy, as stronger democracies result in higher levels of peace. This is particularly important with regards to the South Eastern European countries, as (i) it can serve as an act of counterbalancing the rising influence of China, Turkey, Russia and others, and (ii) increase security and stability in its border. This is essential as the local context should be taken into consideration, particularly in relation to the Agenda 2025. South Eastern Europe remains vulnerable to foreign provocations and influences due to historic grievances between the peoples and states in the region. This being said, the region — from both a geographic and economic perspective — is, and should therefore be treated as, the EU's backyard. Therefore, the Union's enlargement can serve as means of reaffirming the role of the EU as a global actor in the international political order, in line with the shared European objectives of furthering stability, security and peace.

It is also important to note that the processes of EU enlargement are long, time consuming and carry a number of different challenges in domestic, regional and international spheres. However they can be managed. The concerns of the Netherlands and the other Eurosceptic EU member states are legitimate, but they do not fully reflect the realities on the ground. For example, soft-security concerns should be addressed in parallel with the processes of addressing the geo-political

interferences by major international state and non-state actors in the region, which could, in turn, endanger the security and peace of the Union itself and of countries such as the Netherlands.

In sum, whilst the EU seems to support liberal peacebuilding, the Netherlands does not reflect the same position. Weaknesses have been uncovered within the EU as 'enlargement fatigue' takes hold, demonstrated by the Netherlands, along with France and Denmark, rejecting the first steps toward the implementation of the new EU Agenda 2025. The Netherlands therefore is one of the key representatives of the trend of enlargement scepticism, preventing an agreement on EU foreign policy in South Eastern Europe.

Despite this, the EU has already been projecting power in South Eastern Europe to some degree, promoting liberal peace by strengthening state capacity building. Meanwhile, the EU also avoids the responsibility in its exercise of power, driven by the EU's own lack of confidence in its expansion to the east: particularly with its ability to legitimate it in the eyes of the citizens of EU member states (Chandler, 2007).

The actions of the Netherlands demonstrate the difficulties for the EU in relation to this. Dutch Enlargement scepticism, despite being founded in legitimate concerns, does not fully reflect the realities of the aspiring EU members. Therefore, a balanced approach is necessary, created through a synergy of efforts of political and governmental entities, the media and the civil society sector, in order to paint an objective picture of the countries and the region in question.

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