

# **THE RETURN OF ENLARGEMENT**

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In addition to being a turning point in international affairs, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has opened up unforeseen opportunities. Enlargement of the European Union and NATO, which have summits on 23 – 24 June and 29 – 30 June respectively, will be on the top of the agenda. Both have supporters and distractors.

The last time the EU enlarged was nine years ago, for NATO just two years ago. However, none of the recent expansions created so much discussion and ambivalence.

As President Putin is attempting to change the borders of Europe, the continent is consolidating itself against Russia.

## ***Unexpected spill-over effects of Russian aggression***

The countries that are being assessed either did not have any hope of being considered for membership or did not have any recent interest to do so. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, associates of the EU's Eastern Partnership, were not even on the radar of Brussels. The Russian invasion and Ukraine's courageous resistance, Moscow's threat to Moldova and possibly towards the Baltics overrode any previous considerations. With the backing of several EU members, including France and Germany, the European Commission last week gave its green light and proposed to give candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova and a European perspective to Georgia. Although there are some holdouts by a few member states that do not want diminishing the criteria for membership, these recommendations will no doubt be approved at the European Council.

The importance is mostly symbolic rather than producing any immediate substantial change. It will take several years if not decades for both countries to join the EU. The European Commission probably felt it would be inappropriate to bestow candidate status on Georgia which happens to be to the east of Turkey, another candidate in which its geographical connection to Europe has been questioned from time to time. Nevertheless, this may change in the future as Turkey was also once given a European Strategy before becoming a candidate.

For Russia, Ukraine's EU bid is not as disturbing as its accession to NATO. It seems that association with EU does not provide the same protection as NATO membership. This was unfortunately validated when Finland and Sweden, both EU members since 1995, applied for membership to NATO. Russia's invasion and Putin's dream for establishing a new Russian empire gave these two countries a big push towards NATO. Although membership to the alliance was always discussed in Finland and Sweden, it was mostly academic and there was never any large public support.

So far NATO membership has indeed provided a cover from aggression by outside powers. The ongoing hypothetical debate is if Ukraine and Georgia were invited for accession talks at the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008, would it have prevented Russia from its offensive. It is possible that France and Germany, the countries that primarily opposed this from happening are now trying to make amends by promoting EU candidacy.

Although Finland and Sweden are non-controversial countries with impeccable democratic credentials along with the possibility of making meaningful contributions to the alliance, they have now hit an unexpected wall. Turkey has blamed both countries for its arms embargoes as well their support, if not their indifference to the PKK, which is considered a terrorist organization by all EU members. Turkey has raised the stakes by putting conditions to accept them for membership to NATO. Turkey's unpredictability in its foreign relations coupled with its economic woes makes reaching a decision by the Madrid NATO Summit uncertain. Negotiations to find a solution are ongoing.

There have been several instances where decisions at summits were made at the last minute but even if there is none, it would not change much. The United Kingdom has given security guarantees for any aggression to these two countries and as long as Russia is bogged down in Ukraine, there should be no immediate threat. As a result, it would not matter much in real terms if a decision is postponed. A deal will be reached eventually.

### ***Enlargement fatigue is dead, long live enlargement***

Thus, after years of discussing enlargement fatigue, Russia has provided a new vitality for enlargement. It has also opened a new debate on how to align so many countries into a new community. There have been many discussions over the decades on whether and how to change the EU decision making system, as well bringing in new members. Concepts such as two-speed, concentric circles, variable geometry, à-la-carte Europe are not new but have taken a new life in think tanks and in some capitals. In his speech at the European Parliament on the occasion of 9 May Europe Day, French President Macron spoke of a "European Political Community" that will include EU members and non-EU countries.

According to this idea, which is not detailed and explained only in general terms, this community will be presented as an intermediate formula, for example, since Ukraine's EU membership process will take a long time.

In the Balkans, the accession process has stalled. Although Montenegro is the most advanced in the accession negotiations, the EU is delaying the talks. Serbia is hard pressed to overcome its relationship with Kosovo. Non-recognition will prevent any advance for Belgrade's accession. While North Macedonia solved its problems with Greece after many years, it faces new ones with Bulgaria. Although given candidate status in 2014, accession talks have yet to begin with Albania, as it is bundled with Skopje. A summit is envisaged with these countries prior to the European Council. Whether they will be convinced to continue their path toward the EU will depend on what they hear.

With the unexpected emergence of security concerns, it is in everyone's interest to create a new formation in which countries that have difficult relations with the EU can participate. This does not mean that candidates should be included in a new arrangement only because of their security or strategic importance. Ultimately, the main reason for being united is the adoption and implementation of fundamental values such as democracy, freedom of expression and the rule of law. It would be possible even for Russia to one day join such a formation, once it is de-Putinized.

## ***A new, galvanized Europe?***

As the role of international organizations such as the United Nations diminishes due to political stalemate, regional or ad hoc entities gather more significance. The certainty of where one stood during the Cold War is over and the future looks more and more ambiguous. The United States may revert back to isolation after Presidential elections in 2024. China's intentions, despite its rhetoric, could be ominous. When Russia's threat will recede is unknown.

In addition to all this, which is mostly about military security, we all face climate change, excessive energy prices, high inflation, food security issues, migration and the threat of new trade barriers, not to mention global health problems. We can include the political apathy of youth. Whether one likes it or not, globalization is a phenomenon and its effects on any given matter can be felt instantly. The internet and digitalization, once hailed as a tool for providing knowledge to the masses is now considered an additional threat with the spreading of disinformation on just about anything.

Although their rules and objectives differ, the uncertainty of the future provides ample reason for NATO and the European Union to cooperate much more closely. The EU came up with a Strategic Compass a few months ago. NATO will agree on a Strategic Concept in Madrid. They should complement each other. However, the composition of the organizations where some countries that are not members of both institutions could still prevent such cooperation. This calls for the creation of an enabling bridge.

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The Russian invasion woke up many countries and institutions, and gave the latter new purpose. It is high time to use this opportunity and get a hold of the future. A full discussion by all European nations in which the goal would be to reach common ground is essential if Europe is going to become a global player and be taken seriously. As the threats increase, dialogue with all, by all, for all becomes crucial.