EU Enlargement Policy 20 Years after Copenhagen: Candidate and Potential Candidate Countries - Unexpected Policy Shapers?

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The Copenhagen European Council in December 1993 not only gave the green light to enlargement with the CEECs, but also laid down the requirements which the associate countries should satisfy in order to become members. EU enlargement conditionality underwent significant transformations during the expansion of the Union to the East. The EU’s approach towards Bulgaria and Romania, which were ‘part of the same, inclusive and irreversible enlargement processes’, introduced a series of novel developments, which were not limited to the date of accession (Council of the European Union, 2003). The completion of the fifth enlargement and the introduction of the renewed consensus on enlargement as the basis for the EU’s strategy towards South-Eastern Europe signalled a new chapter in the development of the EU’s most successful policy and rekindled the debate about the supply-side of EU enlargement (see İçener, Phinnemore and Papadimitriou, 2010). Furthermore, the changes in the EU’s approach not only highlight the lack of comprehensive comparative frameworks for the study of EU conditionality but also as noted by Pridham (2007) the need to examine EU conditionality contextually with reference to the development of enlargement policy. Although the academic literature concerned with the effectiveness of the EU influence on applicant states has stressed the importance of domestic politics (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004; Hughes et al, 2004; Dimitrova and Toshkov, 2009), the analytical frameworks aimed at investigating the factors shaping the dynamics of EU enlargement policy have neglected the impact of the EU hopefuls. In order to address these gaps in the literature the paper investigates how the profile of the candidate countries can influence EU conditionality by looking into the following two aspects: 1) the impact of problematic issues and reform challenges, which the applicant states need to address, on the scope and range of the EU conditions; and 2) the implications of the existence or lack of group dynamics for the development of the EU’s incentive
structure. The article, which draws on extensive interviews with senior EU and national officials and examination of key EU documents, is structured in three parts. First, it discusses the key themes covered by research on the ‘supply side’ of enlargement. Second, it briefly summarises the advancement of the latest enlargement rounds before analysing the impact of three groups of candidate countries on key policy developments. Finally the paper concludes with a reflection on the relevance of problematic issues and the existence of group dynamics for the evolution of EU enlargement policy.

‘Supply side’ Arguments

The literature concerned with the ‘supply side’ of enlargement focuses predominantly on the EU’s decision to embark on enlargement with the CEECs. Mattli and Plumper summarise the ‘supply-side’ arguments into three categories: negative externalities; economic gains and norms (Mattli and Plumper, 2002). The negative externalities argument suggests that the exclusion of ‘poor and commercially unattractive countries’ is costlier than their integration into the Union; and links the EU’s decision to enlarge with ‘outsiders’ to ‘the extent of actual or potential crisis spill-over’ from the applicant states (Mattli and Plumper, 2002:553-554). The economic gains argument, which focuses on trade and investment, establishes the new opportunities and benefits of extending EU rules and policies to CEE as the reasons for the expansion of the Union. The third category of ‘supply-side’ arguments draws heavily on Schimmelfennig’s work on ‘rhetorical action’ (Mattli and Plumper, 2002). He emphasises the strategic use of norm based argumentation and claims that pro-enlargement member states rhetorically entrapped their opponents into a firm commitment to the Eastern enlargement by grounding their support in the constitutive values and norms of the EU (Schimmelfennig, 2001). Although the supply-side arguments are very helpful in illuminating the motivations of the key actors involved in the accession process, they focus exclusively on significant historical decisions regarding the Eastern expansion of the Union rather than on enlargement at large.

The European integration is often viewed as an elite-centred project that has failed to engage with its public. In a similar vein, the Eastern expansion of the Union is described as an elite-led process decided above the heads of the European citizens.
Therefore, it is not surprising that the impact of the public opinion in the EU member states on the Eastern enlargement did not attract much scholarly attention (but see Eichenberg and Dalton, 1993). In recent years research on the public attitudes towards Turkey – probably the most controversial candidate country – has become very prominent (Dalhman, 2004; Ruiz-Jiménez and Torreblanca, 2007; Schoen, 2008).

Unlike public opinion, the role of member states’ preferences has featured extensively in the academic literature on EU enlargement. Although some analyses look into the impact of individual member states such as Germany, France and Spain, the focus of most studies is limited to one dimension of EU enlargement policy – decision-making regarding the Eastern expansion of the Union (Hyde-Price, 2000; Tewes, 1998; Piedrafita, 2007). Similarly, research on the activism of the Commission is predominantly confined to the development and implementation of EU enlargement strategy towards the CEECs (Sedelmeier 2005, O’Brennan 2006). Furthermore, as the academic literature emphasises the highly asymmetrical power environment in which the accession process takes place, EU member states and institutions are often viewed as the only actors which can engineer and modify the scope of EU enlargement conditionality. However, the literature has witnessed the emergence of studies advocating multi-dimensional approaches to investigating the development of EU enlargement policy, which highlight the relevance of inter-institutional interactions (O’Brennan, 2006) and the continuity and change in the EU’s enlargement strategy across the CEE, Turkey and the Western Balkans (Pridham, 2007, see İçener, Phinnemore and Papadimitriou, 2010).

In order to analyse the evolution of the EU approach towards candidate and potential candidate countries the paper specifies that the **EU enlargement policy is a function of differentiated influences from multiple actors and external pressures.** The definition highlights the complex constellations of actors involved in the accession process and emphasises their relevance by focusing on the influence which they can exert rather than on their competences. As it is virtually impossible to account for all the groups of actors and external shocks which affect the development of EU enlargement policy, the scope of the study is limited to analysing the impact of the profile of the candidate countries on EU enlargement conditionality.
The literature concerned with the effectiveness of the EU influence on applicant states has stressed the importance of domestic politics particularly with reference to veto players and administrative capacities (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004; Hughes, Sasse and Gordon, 2004; Toshkov, 2008). However, the analytical frameworks aimed at investigating the factors shaping the dynamics of EU enlargement policy have neglected the impact of the EU hopefuls. Although enlargement takes place in an environment of power asymmetry and applicant states have very limited bargaining power in the accession process, the EU enlargement strategies show that candidate countries not only inform but also shape the parameters of EU enlargement policy (See European Commission 1997; 2006).

In order to investigate how the profile of the candidate countries can influence EU conditionality, this study looks into the following two aspects:

- the impact of problematic issues and reform challenges, which the applicant states need to address, on the scope and range of the EU conditions; and

- the implications of the existence or lack of group dynamics (analysed with reference to number of candidate countries at similar stages of the accession process) for the development of the incentive structure, particularly with reference to the *accession advancement rewards*

### Candidate and Potential Candidate Countries

Following the end of the Cold war, the queue of membership applicants grew. Turkey, Cyprus, Malta as well as countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) expressed their desire to join the European Communities. The Edinburgh European Council in December 1992 decided to open membership negotiations with Vienna, Helsinki and Stockholm. Although Norway was also included in the accession process, the Norwegian electorate rejected EU membership for the second time in 1994. Nevertheless, the fourth enlargement of the Union to Austria, Finland and Sweden took place on 1 January 1995. In the meantime, the number of the countries aspiring to become member states increased dramatically. Hungary,
Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovenia submitted their applications for EU membership (See Table 1). The European Union embarked on an unprecedented enlargement, described as ‘both a political necessity and a historic opportunity for Europe’ (Council of the European Union, 1995).

The Luxembourg European Council in December 1997 officially launched the overall enlargement process and decided to start accession negotiations with Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. Two years later the Helsinki European Council reaffirmed ‘the inclusive nature of the accession process, which now comprises 13 candidate States within a single framework’ and decided to open membership talks with Romania, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Malta. Furthermore, the European Council confirmed that:

‘Candidate States which have now been brought into the negotiating process will have the possibility to catch up within a reasonable period of time with those already in negotiations if they have made sufficient progress in their preparations’ (Council of the European Union, 1999).

Table 1: Application for Membership of the ECC/EU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicant</th>
<th>Date of Application</th>
<th>Application Outcome/ Date of Accession</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>03.07.1990</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>03.07.1990</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>01.07.1991</td>
<td>01.01.1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>18.03.1992</td>
<td>01.01.1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>25.05.1992</td>
<td>Frozen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>31.03.1994</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>05.04.1994</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>22.06.1995</td>
<td>01.01.2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>27.06.1995</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>13.09.1995</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>24.11.1995</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>08.12.1995</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>17.01.1996</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>10.06.1996</td>
<td>01.05.2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>21.02.2003</td>
<td>01.07.2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FYROM</td>
<td>22.03.2004</td>
<td>Candidate country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montenegro</td>
<td>15.12.2008</td>
<td>Negotiating accession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albania</td>
<td>28.04.2009</td>
<td>Potential candidate country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>17.07.2009</td>
<td>Suspended Accession Negotiations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serbia</td>
<td>22.12.2009</td>
<td>Candidate country</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following a lengthy and complex pre-accession process eight CEECs: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Slovakia; together with Cyprus and Malta concluded the accession negotiations and joined the EU in May 2004. The accession of Bulgaria and Romania in January 2007 marked the end of the fifth enlargement. However, enlargement remains a vital part of the EU’s external policies, as the Union has extended the membership perspective to South-Eastern Europe. The European Council has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the potential membership of all Western Balkan countries¹ and Turkey (Council of the European Union, 2000; 2003; 2005; 2006; 2008; 2011a; 2011b).

Following the completion of the accession negotiations with the EU in 2011, Croatia became the twenty eighth member state of the Union on 1 July 2013. After a three-year hiatus, the accession negotiations with Ankara ‘regained momentum’ with the opening of Chapter 22 – Regional Policy and coordination of structural instruments in November 2013 (Council of the European Union, 2013). The accession process with Montenegro has advanced well. Podgorica opened five chapters: Public procurement (Chapter 5), Company law (Chapter 6), Enterprise and Industrial policy (Chapter 20) and the two crucial chapters on: Judiciary and Fundamental rights (Chapter 23) and Justice, Freedom and Security (Chapter 24) at the Inter-Governmental conference on 17 December 2013. The Commissioner for Enlargement Štefan Füle described the conference as ‘a milestone for the accession negotiations with Montenegro’ (European Commission, 2013). The historic agreement between Belgrade and Pristina cleared the way for advancing their relations with the Union. The EU started the negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association agreement between with Kosovo in October 2013, two months later the EU ministers agreed to begin the membership talks with Belgrade on 21 January 2014 (Council of the European Union, 2013). The Commission recommended for the fifth time the opening of the accession negotiations with FYROM, but it remains blocked by Greece.

¹ Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo (under the UNSCR 1244).
The EU ministers failed to reach unanimity on another of the Commission’s recommendations – the Netherlands’ veto prevented the Council from granting Albania a candidate status (EurActiv, 2013). Whereas the progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina – another aspiring member – has been rather slow and the Council has openly criticised the lack of political will on the part of the political leadership in the country (Council of the European Union, 2013).

With a view to providing a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the candidate countries on the development on the enlargement policy of the Union since Copenhagen European Council in 1993, the article focuses on the following groups of EU hopefuls:

- the first phase of the fifth enlargement, which expanded the Union with the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia; Cyprus, and Malta, also known as the Laeken ten.
- the second phase of the fifth enlargement, which led to the accession of Bulgaria and Romania;
- Croatia’s accession and the ongoing enlargement process with Turkey, and FYROM.

The analysis capitalises on the case study selection and traces:

- the impact of the problematic issues and reform challenges (the applicants need to address) on the scope and range of the EU conditions; and
- the implications of the existence or lack of group dynamics (which is examined with reference to the number of applicant states at the same stage of the accession process) for the development of the incentive structure, particularly with reference to the accession advancement rewards the impact on the EU applicants on the scope and range of EU conditions and the accession advancement rewards provided by the EU to candidate countries.

**The Laeken Ten**

This section analyses the relationship between the group dynamics generated by the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia;
Cyprus and Malta. It is undeniable that the first key development with reference to the conditions set out by the EU for the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe was the establishment of the Copenhagen criteria. Although some have argued that the conditions were set out in order to protect the achievements of the Union (Smith, 2003), we can also advance the argument that the membership conditions reflect the key challenges which the former communist countries were facing in early 1990s. It is interesting to note that in addition to carrying out major political and economic reforms, the candidate countries shared another common feature, as one senior EU official pointed out: ‘[t]here was this sense that these countries had to come back and they were unknown, if you think how many of us have actually been to these countries and how many actually understood how they function’ (Interview 3, 2009).

However, things quickly changed, as an another senior EU official noted: ‘It was recognised quite early on that you were dealing with a fundamental change, dealing with the ten East European countries, you were dealing with a fundamental change in the entire structure of the government’ and pointed out that:

‘[t]he genesis of the Copenhagen criteria was, on one hand a recognition that for geostrategic reasons, political reasons but also for loads of other reasons, we wanted to consolidate democracy in the whole of Central and Eastern Europe’(Interview 20, 2009).

He also emphasised that ‘[t]he logic of the Copenhagen criteria was that the accession process needed to be much more focused on governance and administrative capacity rather than merely looking at what was down on paper’ (Interview 20, 2009). The distinct approach of the Commission towards the CEECs and Cyprus and Malta and the preparation of separate enlargement strategies provide further evidence for the significance of the profile of the candidate countries.

It is important to mention that it was not only the nature of the issues which the applicants needed to address but also their number which had a strong impact on the enlargement process. As one senior Commission official noted, ‘this is the first time, that you have first of all, so many countries, secondly, countries with such a different levels of development, with such a different background’ (Interview 5, 2009). He stressed that ‘we doubled the size, with totally different countries’ and also remarked
that there ‘was a realisation that it was a different type of event; we needed a different approach with this emphasis on preparation before joining’ (Interview 5, 2009).

The number of candidate countries also had important implications for the EU’s decisions to grant key accession advancement rewards, particularly for the start of the accession negotiations. There were heated debates prior to the publication of the Commission’s opinions on the applicant countries. As one senior EU official noted, ‘there were clearly discussions between the Commission and the member states on how to form the different groups whether [there] should be one negotiation or whether [there] should be a number of different negotiations’ (Interview 18, 2009). Another senior Commission official confirmed that: ‘It has always been one of the big dilemmas. Should we actually take a country when it has met a criteria purely on its own merit or is there a political adjustment to go along fine?’ (Interview 3, 2009). Another Commission official summarised the main considerations by saying that:

‘it was more a question of the choice between, until the very end, between those who felt that it should be individual, regatta style approach, where the faster you run, the quicker you enter the EU and the others who felt it was not fair to have this kind of race and you would not get a balanced outcome, if you get some countries and other are left out and might get disappointed or unmotivated’ (Interview 5, 2009).

Although some member states like Denmark wanted to open negotiations with all countries, the Luxembourg European Council gave the green light to the start of the accession negotiations with only six countries – Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Slovenia and Cyprus (Council of the European Union 1997). However, the decisions of the Helsinki European Council to open negotiations with all candidate countries (with the exception of Turkey) established a new group dynamics and introduced the catch-up principle. One senior Commission official reflected on the significance of the Helsinki conclusions by saying:

‘I think that you have seen a gradual shift from an approach which was truly based on the country meeting the first of the Copenhagen economic criteria –
market economy – that was differentiating criteria and was the one that most of the discussions were focused on, pre-Helsinki’ (Interview 3, 2009).

Further, she stressed that ‘it was a significant policy shift to say that we take everybody in and we adjust that criteria in the process’ (Interview 3, 2009).

It is evident that the size of the newly unified group of negotiating countries also had important implications for another accession advancement reward – the credibility of the membership perspective and the establishment of a provisional timetable for the completion of the process. One EU official recollected that ‘In the 2004 enlargement we had this kind of an ‘armada’ approach... there was group of countries, so there was a need to have at least an indicative schedule for things to happen, so that everybody was drawn on board’ (Interview 12, 2009). He further highlighted the relevance of the group dynamics by specifying that ‘there was peer pressure amongst the candidates themselves and then there was a schedule from our side and that gave a rhythm and pace for our work and then there was a target that worked’ (Interview 12, 2009).

There is also evidence for the significance of the group dynamics for the completion of the accession process. As one senior EU Commission official pointed out, with regard to Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia (which started accession negotiations in 2000 and managed to complete them in 2002):

‘We were a bit generous with them as well. They did not go through a similar vigorous process, as did the Estonians and the Czechs and others. To be honest, we gave certain discounts to them, because it became a political will not to separate, not to draw away these countries’(Interview 10, 2009).

He noted that ‘if we had applied exactly the same methodology, as the one we applied with the six, with whom we started in March 1999, the Helsinki countries, as you call them, the second group of countries would have become members a little bit later’ (Interview 10, 2009).

The findings reveal that the profile of the candidate countries (particularly the problematic issues or the deficiencies that they need to address or improve) influences the range and scope of EU conditions. Furthermore, the analysis
highlights the crucial role of the group dynamics among applicant states. As evidenced by the European journeys of the eight CEECs, Cyprus and Malta, the existence of strong group dynamics affects the EU’s decisions regarding the granting of accession advancement rewards.

**Bulgaria and Romania**

The previous section highlighted the links between the purpose and the range of the Copenhagen criteria and the issues which the CEECs needed to address urgently. In the early 1990s, both Bulgaria and Romania were faced with the same challenges as the other associated countries (Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia) – carrying out major political and economic reforms. Therefore, we can confirm that the membership conditions also reflect the demanding tasks which Sofia and Bucharest had to tackle. However, both Balkan states offer more insights into the relationship between the profile of the candidate countries and the nature of EU conditions. First, the introduction of additional country-specific conditions for the start of accession negotiations highlights the strong link between sensitive issues such as nuclear safety (Bulgaria), economic reform, childcare reform (Romania) and the formalisation and extension of conditions with which applicants needed to comply in order to join the Union. Furthermore, the establishment of the CVM which has introduced several sets of country-specific benchmarks reinforces the significance of the profile of the candidates for the development of the EU conditions even after accession. As one senior EU Commission official pointed out with reference to the introduction of the CVM:

‘what happened was that we thought that the critical mass was there and we could make a decent case that the countries had not completed the reforms, it was obvious, but the critical mass was there that they could be taken in, in 2007 and there were wider geopolitical considerations, but at the same time, we had to be open for the facts that the situations was not satisfactory and therefore, we decided to take some exceptional measures’ (Interview 9, 2009).
The comments were echoed by another senior EU official who also confirmed that ‘[t]he reason for the special mechanism was that many felt that Bulgaria and Romania were not ready yet, especially institutionally’ (Interview 12, 2009).

In addition to the nature of the issues which the applicants needed to address, it is also important to examine the impact of the number of candidate countries on the advancement of the accession process. Although Bulgaria and Romania acceded to the Union together in 2007, they were also part of other group configurations throughout the fifth enlargement of the EU. Initially, Bulgaria and Romania were grouped together with the Visegrád countries, as all five of them signed the TCAs with the European Community in 1989/90. Although Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia ascended on the ladder of contractual relations by signing EAs in 1991, it was not until 1993 that Bulgaria and Romania were also granted a status of associate country. However, by 1997 the situation had changed as the Commissioner for External Relations pointed out:

‘It is scarcely surprising that some applicants are more advanced than others in satisfying the conditions for membership which were established by the Copenhagen and Madrid European Councils. Some began the transition to systems based on political and economic freedom earlier than others. Some chose more rapid and more far reaching reform strategies than others. Some have been more resolute and more robust in implementing reforms. This is no reproach but simply a reflection of different historical, political, economic and social situations’ (Van den Broek, 1997b).

Although the Commission recommendations, which provided the basis for the Luxembourg conclusions, divided the applicants into two groups, the Commissioner stressed that: ‘We never think in terms of "ins" and "outs" but rather of "ins" and "pre-ins"’ (Van den Broek, 1997b). The Progress reports in 1998 confirmed that Bulgaria and Romania were lagging behind the other ‘pre-ins’ (Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia), however, the Helsinki European Council introduced a significant policy shift by inviting all the countries from the ‘second group’ to start accession negotiations. The existence of group dynamics had important implications for key EU’s decisions to grant one of the key accession advancement rewards – opening
accession negotiations – to Bulgaria and Romania. As one senior EU official pointed out:

‘I think the feeling then was that there was not much to be gained by leaving Bulgaria and Romania out, because in Romania, although the economic situation was very bad, we were in 1999 seeing the first signs of a government which was trying to get things in hand. And we saw already the proof of that in 2000, in terms of the first positive economic growth, since 1995-1996. And I think for Bulgaria, it was party political but also there was also a sense that Bulgaria was starting to organise itself. We’ve gone from the huge problems in 1997 and so it was a little bit of a reward, for the fact that they have been in all these upheaval. We had a government again which was prone to establish order, so it was political in the sense that probably we could have not done it but on the other hand it was also political that it was intended in the different cases to be response to a significant change in the approach to economic policy and the political situation’ (Interview 20, 2009).

Another senior EU official also highlighted the relevance of group dynamics for the advancement of the accession process and commented that:

‘[t]here was a strong political push also to have Bulgaria and Romania in it [the Helsinki group] and I have the impression that there also a clear link between the debate on the three Baltic countries and Bulgaria and Romania. In a sense that the three Baltic countries were considered not to be really in a state to join the EU but there was a very strong pressure coming more from the Northern member states. So a number of others also said, then, it does not make a lot of sense: three Baltic states come in, but Bulgaria and Romania do not come in, and there was the whole of question of the stabilisation of the Balkans which played a big role. Although it was rapidly clear that Bulgaria and Romania would not be able to join at the same time as the other ten, it was also very clear that they should be part of the fifth enlargement (Interview 18, 2009).

Despite being ‘reunited’ with the other negotiating countries, both Balkan states again managed to form a group within the group of candidate countries. Neither Sofia nor Bucharest set 2003 or 2004 as their own target date for accession to the Union. Another senior Commission official also acknowledged the existence of
dividing lines and recollected that ‘it was meant that they would not come in, in 2004, I think there was general agreement they were not ready’ and commented that:

‘2007 was something that was picked as a time, they [Bulgarians] knew that would not be as advanced as the other countries but they could not have known that they would be ready in 2007. To be honest it was the best guess and I remember, part of my job was thinking can we make that a reality because we know they are not going to be ready for 2004, can we then make sure that 2007 actually happens’ (Interview 3, 2009).

There is also evidence for the significance of the group dynamics for another accession advancement reward – the credibility of the membership perspective – particularly with reference to the establishment of timetables for the completion of the accession process and setting target dates. The Thessaloniki European Council provides evidence that this was also the case for Bulgaria and Romania. Although they were separated from the ‘Laeken ten’ which became members of the EU in 2004, the Council confirmed that:

‘Bulgaria and Romania are part of the same inclusive and irreversible enlargement process. Following the conclusions of the European Council in Copenhagen and depending on further progress in complying with the membership criteria, the objective is to welcome Bulgaria and Romania as members in 2007’ (Council of the European Union, 2003).

The link between the significance of the group dynamics and the EU’s commitment to 2007 as a target date was also highlighted by a senior EU official who commented that when ‘a big decision is made for some [candidate countries] then there is also a message for the others [...] you cannot avoid it. It is a moment when the other country feels totally left out’ (Interview 5, 2009). The official noted that ‘it is unavoidable because when you decide to let some in, you will also have to give the message to the others’ (Interview 5, 2009).

The comparative analysis of the profile of Bulgaria and Romania provides more evidence for the impact of applicant states on the development of EU enlargement conditionality. The research findings highlight the strong links between the
challenging issues which Sofia and Bucharest had to address and several novel developments (establishment of addition country specific conditions for opening accession negotiations and the introduction of post-accession monitoring mechanism), which illustrate the growing application of differentiated and targeted conditionality. Furthermore, the analysis confirms the influence of group dynamics on the advancement of the accession process.

**Croatia, Turkey and FYROM**

The previous two sections highlighted the links between the range of the Copenhagen criteria and the issues which the CEECs needed to address urgently. The development of EU enlargement policy towards Zagreb, Skopje and Ankara provides more evidence for the strong relationship between the profile of the candidate countries and the nature of EU conditions. The breakup of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia led to the emergence of new independent states amid series of violent ethnic conflicts, damaging both the economies and the social fabric of the region. The Commissioner Rehn acknowledged the complexity of the situation and noted that:

‘The Western Balkans is a particular challenge for the EU. The region contains small countries that are at different stages on their road towards membership. Consequently, the enlargement policy needs to transform itself into the specific needs of these weak states and divided societies’ (Rehn, 2006a).

A member of Croatia’s Permanent Mission to the EU reflected on the new developments and pointed out that:

‘we belong to a different process, in terms of the political name that was given to it – the Stabilisation and Association process – a policy invented by the EU to develop inter-regional policy. So we belong to that group of countries which were given the European perspective especially after the Thessaloniki summit [...]. The regional approach and then the SAP took a look at the specificity of the countries and one of the specificities was that they had the war situation during the 1990s – out of which you have the ICTY cooperation; out of which you have the obligation for the refugee return; out of which of you have to settle all these questions considered to be necessary so the countries could progress further, that
was the political decision and also maybe analysis of what was needed on ground in a post-conflict situations (Interview 1, 2009).

In addition to building strong democracies and functioning market economies, the Union has repeatedly underlined the importance of regional cooperation for long-term stability, economic development and reconciliation in the Western Balkans and called on the countries to take stronger ownership of the process (Council of the European Union, 2000; 2003; 2005; 2006; 2008; 2011a; 2011b). Although the EU confirmed that the SAP ‘is at the heart of the Union’s policy’ towards region, it also stressed that ‘it takes account of the situation of each country’ and ‘proposes an individualized approach to each of the countries’ (Zagreb Declaration, 2000). The introduction of additional country-specific conditions for the start of accession negotiations with Croatia, Turkey and FYROM illustrates the increasing application of differentiated conditionality and highlights the growing significance of the profile of the candidate countries. Furthermore, the simultaneous start of the negotiations with Zagreb and Ankara emphasises the strong link between the group dynamics generated by candidate countries and the evolution of EU enlargement policy. A Croatian national official pointed up the similarities in the EU’s approach towards both countries and commented that:

‘the negotiating frameworks were discussed at the same time and there is always this balancing act the EU is doing. They say it’s individual and Turkey is a special case, but you still have two documents on the table, one for Turkey, one for Croatia and when you think about Croatia’s negotiating framework, of course the discussion on Turkey influences, of course the discussion on the what will happen on the Western Balkans influences it, because the EU is not drafting only a document for Croatia. They claim that it’s an individual process but all the documents always are influenced by either looking at something else and the wider picture [...]. The negotiating frameworks say that the negotiations are an open-ended process. What does it mean for Turkey? We know it was there because of Turkey, they wanted to emphasise this sentence that it was open-ended process, no guarantee that Turkey will become a member but that sentences is still in Croatia’s negotiation framework (Interview 1, 2009).

Furthermore, the group dynamics generated by Zagreb and Ankara has also had an impact on another aspect of EU enlargement policy – the range of the conditions for
opening and closing individual chapters. A national official reflected on the similarities in the EU Common positions and observed that:

‘because we had the screening together with Turkey, we had a feeling that the benchmarks, sometimes, if you compare the benchmarks, opening and closing benchmarks for Croatia and Turkey, they were informed by the Turkish case in Croatia’s case and vice versa, they are similar, sometimes’ (Interview 1, 2009).

However, the impact of the applicant states is not limited to the scope and the range of EU conditions, the accession process with Croatia, Turkey and FYROM stresses the relevance of the group dynamics among the EU hopefuls for the advancement of the accession process. A Croatian national official reflected on Zagreb’s application for membership by discussing how being excluded from the fifth enlargement round made it more difficult to generate momentum for their candidacy:

‘we had to lobby hard when we applied for membership because we were discouraged to apply. Actually, it was an effort of six months. We talked to all the member states, the Commission. They were very reluctant, they actually discouraged Croatia to apply because they still did not know what will happen with negotiations from the fifth enlargement. We wanted to apply, we wanted to catch up but we were discouraged [...] at that time, the negotiations were in the final stage with the ten, so after a while it became easier, but we really worked very closely with the Commission trying to convince them to consider our application’ (Interview 1, 2009).

The official further pointed out that:

‘there was much bigger drive in the fifth enlargement [...] in our case, every step that we went through was not more difficult but there were more obstacles in political sense: to get the application for membership accepted; to convince that we are a good candidate; to start accession negotiations. Every step took more time in procedural terms and more months for the EU to decide to take every step along the way’ (Interview 1, 2009).

Although the launch of the membership talks with Zagreb and Ankara marked a historical milestone for the EU’s enlargement policy, the lack of strong group
dynamics among the two countries prevented them from boosting their positions in the negotiations with the Union. A Croatian national official highlighted the implications of the wide range of differences between Turkey and Croatia and commented that:

‘In the beginning we tried [working together] but then we realised that we are so different, and their approach is so different [...] even if we talk about education and culture, we still found differences in the approaches of the two countries. We exchanged information, we have very good cooperation with them, both in Turkey and here and it has worked, but in term of having a joint effort they are such different cases, we cannot lobby further for such different cases, we don’t have such close ties as they had in the fifth enlargement’ (Interview 1, 2009).

Although Zagreb and Ankara completed together the screening of the acquis, their paths diverged: Turkey progressed at a modest pace, while the negotiations with Croatia reached an advanced stage. The Commission for Enlargement acknowledged that ‘the next country likely to join is Croatia, with others at different points along the road’ (Rehn, 2006c). However, as Zagreb emerged at the finishing line, the lack of strong group dynamics influenced another step of the accession process – the conclusion of the negotiations. A Commission official confirmed that the border dispute between Croatia and Slovenia delayed the finalisation of the membership talks and noted that:

‘the political pressure on completing the enlargement with Croatia is by far not the same as it was with the twelve. The accession of the fifth enlargement countries was a clear priority for the EU, for the Commission and for the member states’ (Interview 7, 2009).

The lack of strong group dynamics among Turkey Croatia and FYROM (as well as the other Western Balkan countries) has had an impact on another accession advancement reward – the credibility of the membership perspective. A senior Commission official highlighted the link between the number of applicant states at the same stage of the accession process and the EU’s approach to establishing timetables and target dates and pointed out that:
'We are also in a situation where the candidates and possible candidates are at such different stages of the process that it would be impossible to set out any unanimous common schedules and then set out differentiating schedules. I am not sure that that would be helpful because that would result immediately in rows between the candidate countries and then comparing timetables: why do you have this timetable? And why do we have that timetable? And that’s not where the focus should really be on. So the usefulness of the target dates at this stage is quite questionable, and maybe at some point later but at this point – no' (Interview 12, 2009).

The findings reveal that the profile of Croatia, Turkey and FYROM and particularly the problematic issues and the deficiencies that they need to address has influenced significantly the range and scope of EU conditions. Furthermore, the study illustrates that the lack of strong group dynamics among the candidate countries can have a detrimental impact on the advancement of the accession process. The slow pace of the enlargement with the countries of South-Eastern Europe cannot be solely attributed to the lack of a large group of candidates at the same stage of the process. However, the European journeys of Croatia, Turkey and FYROM illustrate that it has become increasing more difficult for individual countries to build up and keep the momentum for their membership aspirations.

**Conclusion**

The comparative study of three groups of candidates over a period of twenty years reveals that candidates have significantly influenced the scope of the membership conditions. It is important to acknowledge that there are competing but not mutually excluding explanations for the development of the EU conditions, particularly for the establishment of the Copenhagen criteria. Although some have argued that the conditions were set out in order to protect the achievements of the Union (Smith, 2003), we can also advance the argument that the membership conditions reflect the key challenges which the former communist countries were facing in early 1990s, as all of the CEECs were to deal with major political and economic reforms. The distinct approach of the Commission towards the CEECs and Cyprus, Malta and Turkey, manifested in the preparation of separate enlargement strategies provides further
evidence for the relevance of the individual problematic issues and challenging reforms. The 2007 enlargement offers more insights into the relationship between the profile of the candidate countries and the scope and range of the EU conditions. The introduction of additional country specific conditions with which Bulgaria and Romania had to comply was not limited to the early stages of the process. By establishing sets of individual benchmarks for Sofia and Bucharest, the CVM highlights not only the evolutionary nature but also the increasing application of differentiated and targeted conditionality. Furthermore, the incorporation of the SAP conditionality in the accession process with the Western Balkan countries and the establishment of additional individual conditions for the opening of the accession negotiations with Turkey, Croatia and FYROM provide more evidence for the EU’s increasing differentiating approach. Therefore, we can conclude that the profile of the candidate countries (and more precisely the range of the problematic issues they need to deal with) has a substantial impact on the scope of the EU conditions and it has led to the growing use of differentiated and targeted conditionality.

In order to examine another channel for influencing the development of EU enlargement, the analysis looks into the relationship between the existence or lack of group dynamics among the candidate countries and the development of the incentive structure, particularly with reference to the accession advancement rewards. The definition of group dynamics is not limited to the number of countries; it is also conditioned by their advancement in the accession process.

The comparative analysis of the fifth enlargement identifies various configurations of groups. Initially, it was the Visegrád three, then they were joined by Bulgaria and Romania in a group of five associate countries; after the Luxembourg European Council, there were – the ‘ins’ and ‘pre-ins’. The Helsinki summit altered the dynamics by establishing one group of twelve negotiating countries, but soon Bulgaria and Romania were separated from the Laeken ten. The detailed discussions in the previous sections confirm that the decisions regarding the granting of key accession advancement rewards – such as the opening and closing of the accession negotiations were also affected by the existence of group dynamics. Furthermore, EU officials reflected on the relevance of the group dynamics for another accession advancement reward – commitment to a credible membership perspective – and
confirmed that although candidate countries continuously asked for target dates, it was their unprecedentedly high number which facilitated the establishment of timetables and target dates. The interviewees also confirmed the link between the decision of the Council to establish 2007 as the target date for the accession of Bulgaria and Romania and the group dynamics established by the twelve negotiating countries. The examination of the ongoing enlargement, which includes small states at different stages of the process, provides more evidence for the relevance of the number of candidate and potential candidate countries and level of advancement of their relations with the Union. In contrast with the fifth enlargement round, the Union acknowledged that there would be ‘no enlargement with a large number of countries in the future’ and confirmed that it would refrain from setting any target dates. Furthermore, the EU has continuously distinguished between the two most advanced candidate countries – Croatia and Turkey. There was a virtual agreement among the interviewees that Turkey is in a group of its own. However, following Iceland’s application for membership, the speculations about welcoming both Croatia and Iceland together in 2011 or 2012 highlight the relevance of group dynamics for the accession process.

The comparative analysis of the impact of the candidate countries on EU enlargement conditionality confirms that although applicant states have a narrow scope for manoeuvring in the accession process, they do indirectly shape the development of the EU enlargement policy. The strong comparative dimension of the study reveals that the impact of the profile of the candidate countries (particularly the problematic issues or the deficiencies that they need to address or improve) on the range and scope of EU conditions was not limited to a single enlargement wave. As evidenced by a number of novel developments such as the additional conditions for Bulgaria and Romania, SAP conditionality, the introduction of the CVM, candidate countries have substantially shifted the scope and the range of EU conditions. Furthermore, the study confirms that the existence or the lack of group dynamics influences the incentive structures. Whereas strong group dynamics can accelerate the advancement of the accession process, lack of group dynamics can jeopardise the credibility of the membership perspective with reference to the EU’s commitments to target dates. We can conclude that despite their limited bargaining power in the accession negotiations, candidate countries are unexpected policy-
shapers which is reflected by the increasing application of differentiated and targeted conditionality.

**Bibliography**


