

**The October European Council and EU
Enlargement: Business as Usual?
with Frauke Seebass**



Philipp Lamprecht: Hello and welcome, everyone, to this ECIPE conversation on the conclusions on enlargement of the European Council of 15–16 October. This is a follow-up to our recent ECIPE Insight, titled “Why the October Summit Must Make Enlargement More Credible and Economically Meaningful”.

I am very pleased to have with me Frauke Seebass, member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, also called BiEPAG, and Research Fellow at the South-East Europe Programme of ELIAMEP. Frauke, a pleasure to have you.

Frauke Seebass: Thank you very much. I am happy to be here.

Philipp: As you know, Frauke, this conversation also builds on our study published before the summer, titled “From Periphery to Power: The Geoeconomic Case for Southeast Europe”, in which we analysed the geoeconomic and strategic importance of the Western Balkans for Europe, and the need for a credible and economically meaningful EU strategy on enlargement.

Given our research over the past months, my first question to you is, of course: what do you think about yesterday’s Council conclusions? Did they deliver what is needed?

Frauke: Thank you, Philipp. I think the answer is very clearly no.

If we look back at June, we had the EU–Western Balkans summit in Tivat, and there was a lot of new momentum and many new proposals on the table from different member states on how to make the enlargement process more dynamic and how to prepare the European Union for enlargement. But instead of having the big October Council on enlargement, the topic first dropped lower on the list – from being the topic, to one of the topics, to one of the less important topics, to a point of conversation during dinner. And in the end, it turns out it was not discussed at all.

So we are very far away from the suggestions we heard from, for example, Commissioner Marta Kos, that this could become the Helsinki moment for the next enlargement round. She was referring to the 1999 Helsinki summit, prior to the 2004 ‘Big Bang’ enlargement, which was the moment of political commitment by the leaders to really move forward with that round of enlargement. This has not happened.

We will now see whether we will have this kind of discussion during the December European Council, or not at all. There was a lot to discuss. We finally saw the publication of the pre-enlargement policy reviews by the European Commission on 6 October, which are basically an analysis and a guideline for both enlargement and the internal reforms the EU needs to prepare for it. But, as I said, there were no discussions on these and no decisions were taken. It will be crucial to translate them

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into practice in the coming months, ahead of the regular December European Council.

As you probably heard, there will be another European Council in November, but it will focus exclusively on the MFF. So hopefully a solution will be found for the next Multiannual Financial Framework in November, so that December can actually focus on enlargement and reforms. But looking at the discussions we have seen today and yesterday – we are recording this on 16 October – I think it is fair to say that it does not look like the deadlock on the MFF is going to be broken anytime soon.

We do, of course, have Council conclusions on the enlargement and reform file. These are unchanged from the draft conclusions, but there are still some interesting points in them, especially in the wording. The conclusions do recognise the pre-enlargement policy reviews, but they 'take note' of them. The same is true of the Irish Presidency's aim to close all negotiating chapters with Montenegro by the end of this year: both sentences say that the Council takes note, rather than welcomes. For example, the Council welcomes the negotiations on the accession treaty with Montenegro, but it does not welcome the pre-enlargement policy reviews or the Irish plan.

For the reviews, it is fair to say there was not enough discussion to give a positive or negative verdict, although it is a bit ominous. But on the Irish Presidency's plan to finish negotiations by the end of the year, I think it is very clear that not all member states are on the same page or see it as feasible.

Just one last point on this. I think that in the near future the enlargement file will remain primarily with the Commission, which is a real pity, because we see very clearly that we urgently need leadership from the member states to actually move forward. Regardless of whether Montenegro closes all chapters this year or early next year, once it does, the ball will be fully in the EU's court, and it does not seem that the EU is actually prepared for that.

Philipp: Thank you very much. I see that you are a little disappointed by the Council conclusions. It seems that the topic of enlargement did not receive the sense of urgency, the political priority, or the political will and momentum from member states that I personally hear a lot about when I talk to experts in the region, and also to experts in EU member states.

As we know from our research, there is a clear geoeconomic and geostrategic dimension to enlargement when it comes to the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe. It is a key region for the EU, and it is highly contested. We found, for example, that China has a stronger presence and visibility in Serbia – to mention just one

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country – also in terms of financial integration. China is catching up. The EU is still quite visible and of course has a strong economic presence in the region, but China is clearly increasing its presence, so we do see competition there. This also has to be seen in the context of the United States and the Trump administration, the security dimension of the ongoing war in Europe, and Russia's general presence in the region.

So, given these findings from our research, and from your own conversations with experts in the region, why do you think it is important to go deeper, to give more priority to this issue and to treat it as a strategic one? What are the key points for you, why has this Council been a bit of a disappointment in terms of its conclusions on enlargement, and why do you think we should do more?

Frauke: Thank you. I completely agree with you. Southeast Europe is a key geopolitical and geoeconomic arena for the European Union, but I would say it has not been taken seriously by most leaders.

One of the reasons, I think, is that enlargement – and also the other topics you mentioned – are usually discussed in silos and at a very technical level, which takes the urgency out of them. When you go into the technical details, you do not feel the political urgency. We are really missing an overarching vision that brings these topics together, because in a way they all refer to the same thing. As you and I know, enlargement is not an end in itself. We do not enlarge to become larger. But it is a really important tool, and it has proven in the past to be a really important tool, to make the EU stronger, more resilient, more competitive, safer and more defensible. All of these things are closely connected. But these connections are usually not the topic of the leaders' discussions.

You mentioned, of course, our study "From Periphery to Power", for which we worked with many experts from the region. It clearly shows that there is a very deep interconnection between EU enlargement and the EU's drive for strategic autonomy, especially in key areas. There is also a huge difference, which I think is not always recognised, between this upcoming round of enlargement, starting with Montenegro, and previous rounds: now we have the adversaries that you mentioned, or at least competitors. There are differences between, say, Russia, China, the Gulf states, Turkey and also the US, as you mentioned, but they are all competitors for influence. Some of them have very heavy weapons to prevent the EU's success in the region, and all of them have very convincing arguments to secure their influence.

We see this, of course, in Ukraine and Moldova, but it is often overlooked that this is definitely also the case for the Western Balkans. You mentioned China, which is increasing its footprint, especially in Serbia, but also in the other countries. And what

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is really important is that it does so in critical areas that pertain to strategic autonomy, such as defence, but also raw materials, digital connectivity and so forth. Russia, as we also found, is less economically powerful, but it still has very strong connections, especially through powerful local proxies, through which it can still wield influence. And then, of course, there is the changed role of the US in the region, and recent investments, made public, by people or investors close to the Trump family, which are heavily contested. All of this has dramatically changed the situation for the EU. But I think one of the key reasons why the EU has not really come to terms with it is this siloing.

So I think – and this is also a key recommendation of our study – it is high time that the EU integrates the region and the individual countries much more systematically and meaningfully. We have seen that when the EU leaves gaps and disengages, they are filled by other actors. This also increases systemic dependencies on those actors, which is clearly a lose-lose situation for the EU and for Europe as a whole: the benefits that other actors now reap are no longer available to the EU, so it gains fewer advantages from deeper integration. And these increased dependencies will also make integration itself more difficult, because they are much harder to loosen once they are there.

So we really have to be much more strategic in integration, especially in strategic areas such as defence, resilient supply chains, connectivity, energy and the green transition – basically all the top areas. But we always discuss them in separate packages rather than bringing them together, so that we have a much broader discussion and connect the dots in a meaningful way, rather than discussing them only technically.

Philipp: Thank you very much for already opening up the final part of this conversation, which is, of course, what the EU should do next. My worry when I think about these issues – and this is what I have been observing over the past years – is that the EU, and now again this Council, seems to be continuing with business as usual. In my opinion, this carries inherent price tags, both for the EU and for the countries in the region.

If you continuously keep countries that are willing to accede to the EU in a sort of waiting room, and this adds up to decades, then you observe that certain countries end up, proverbially, sitting on the fence. They make themselves comfortable there, reaching out with one hand to one side and with the other hand to the other side, and this is not very constructive for the entire process. I believe some of these countries have become comfortable with being in a waiting room for so long.

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What we also observed in our research is that many Western Balkan countries have now developed agency, which means they can effectively choose different paths forward. They are not entirely dependent on waiting for the EU indefinitely. And finally, in my opinion, the element of frustration and the psychological dimension within the societies of these countries should not be underestimated. The recent talk about associate membership for Canada, for example, must be somewhat confusing for countries in Southeast Europe that have been waiting for years, or decades, to get closer to the EU.

So I think it is very important to spend time getting to know the concerns and needs of civil society, business stakeholders, governments and ministry officials in these countries, to understand them better – and also, as you mentioned, to rally political momentum in the member states. This is, I think, one of the big shortcomings of the current process: there are declarations by the EU and there is a willingness to move forward, but it is not shared equally among all member states.

So, to make this more concrete and economically meaningful, as we called for in our recent ECIPE Insight, I would like to ask you the big question at the end: if you could make only one or two clear recommendations to the EU, given the business as usual this Council seems to have delivered, what would they be? What are the main urgencies from your point of view, and what should the EU do?

Frauke: Thank you very much for this question. Just to come back to one of the things you said: I think the countries always had agency, but the EU's offer was so big and so attractive compared to anything else – or perhaps it was the only offer on the table for many of the countries – that both sides got used to this being the only path forward. Then, as you said, with less focus on the enlargement process on both sides, there has been this kind of comfortable waiting room. It was obviously not equally comfortable for everyone, but governments on all sides have learned to cope with it and make the best of it for themselves, which of course is also a problem now when it comes to breaking the deadlock.

I think this is also something the leaders have been waking up to, especially since 2022 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: there are other actors now, and the EU's offer is no longer the only one on the table. This is true for some countries more than others. At the same time, there is definitely an understanding that the process needs to change, to make the most of it for the EU and to make the EU a meaningful geopolitical actor. We have talked about this new enlargement momentum since 2022, and since this year we have a multitude of new options on the table on how to accelerate enlargement, ensure that it makes the EU stronger, and prepare the Union for it.

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I already mentioned the pre-enlargement policy reviews, which bring this together very nicely, and I think they were very encouraging, particularly in the direct connection they make between gradual access to the Single Market – which is, of course, the big gun the EU has to offer, the big carrot – and geopolitical alignment, specifically adopting sanctions against Russia. This is new, and it was welcomed by many, because it makes the direct connection between geopolitics and enlargement. I think this is very important. But this is only what the Commission has provided; it is basically an analysis. Now it is up to the leaders to show real political commitment and leadership.

And this would be my key recommendation: they need to present a credible new offer to the candidates – while making sure, of course, that the EU and the member states are ready to welcome them – and also offer earlier pathways to political participation. That means getting them not only on the table, but at the table, sooner than their actual accession to the EU. Of course, this has to be tied to the necessary reforms and full geopolitical alignment, but both sides need to be there. So far, the political leadership in particular, as this Council has shown, is really lacking, and this is also acting as a brake on the urgency.

My second point is that this is especially true for Southeast Europe and the so-called Western Balkans, as we have also seen in our study and in the shorter piece you just mentioned. We see that Montenegro is moving forward, but at the same time it risks being blocked by issues raised by member states, because in the enlargement process we need unanimity: all member states need to buy in. We see that Albania is making some progress, but there are different dynamics, and I think recent developments are not very encouraging. And above all, we see that the other four Western Balkan countries remain effectively blocked in the process, for both internal and external reasons, and no way forward is being envisioned for them at the moment. This is also something nobody seems to be talking about.

Here we see, on the one hand, as we already discussed, the effects of the stalled process – they have been in the waiting room for more than 20 years now – and, on the other hand, the very different geopolitical landscape. All of this clearly demands a revised and substantially upgraded EU strategy that aims at the deepest possible integration as soon as possible, and that really needs political commitment. I cannot emphasise this enough.

We have concrete examples – policies that are either being upgraded at the moment or new policies coming into play. We have, for example, the Global Gateway, which is in a way also the EU's answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Here we can use it much more effectively to mobilise funding faster, together with the Western

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Balkans Investment Framework. We should definitely make sure that the countries are integrated into the new EU FDI Screening Regulation, also to prevent the corrosive investments the region has seen in recent years. And we should really consider the candidates as part of the upcoming revision of the public procurement directives and the Industrial Accelerator Act. These are very concrete fields where we should think of the candidates as part of the package, not as an afterthought to be integrated later – because this has been the case for most of the policies we have seen in recent years.

Finally, what is really important – and here I come back to the beginning of our conversation – is that we look at the bigger picture, to make sure that enlargement is used as a tool to systematically strengthen the EU while, as you mentioned, delivering to the candidates and to the societies of both the candidate countries and the EU, rather than risking even more protraction, as we are currently seeing. Because we also need to ask ourselves – and I think this is a key question – what if we fail with Montenegro? What does this mean for the future of the EU, and for any of its geopolitical aspirations, when we look at Ukraine, or at anything Europe or the EU wants to achieve? What if we fail Montenegro? I think this question alone should be enough.

Philipp: Thank you very much, Frauke. I think you stressed two very important points: this sense of geopolitical urgency, and the need for real political momentum. These are two good conclusions on which to end this conversation. Thank you very much, Frauke,

for joining us, and I look forward to continuing to research and assess these developments together with you in the future.

Frauke: Thank you very much, Philipp. Take care.