

The transforming role of the European Commission in the EU integration process

Abstract

Within the current geopolitical atmosphere of instability and insecurity on the eastern borders of the EU, enlargement has resurfaced as a topic of high priority, being a basic condition for the future of European integration. The effectiveness of EU enlargement policy, largely considered as the most successful EU policy, is starting to raise serious concerns. A key problem of the EU's approach so far has been the extreme role of the European Commission as a political actor conducting a discretionary policy, hidden behind the claim of a completely strict, objective assessment based on the merits of the candidate countries. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative empirical analysis, and using the symptomatic example of Bulgaria, this article aims to understand how the Commission has perceived the specificities of the task of expanding to the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe and how, based on this perception, it has built its interaction with them. The author concludes that the failures of the policy need to be remedied if future enlargements to the western Balkans are to be successful.

Keywords: European Commission, enlargement policy, accession of central and east European countries, Bulgaria, conditionality

Introduction

Within the current geopolitical atmosphere of instability and insecurity on the eastern borders of the EU, enlargement has resurfaced as a topic of high priority, being a basic condition for the future of European integration. Since the end of the Cold War, enlargement has been the EU's non-military tool for achieving peace and security (Dimitrov 2022; Wood 2017; O'Brennan 2006; O'Brennan 2007; Piedrafita and Torreblanca 2005), both of which are now seriously under threat in the new geopolitical environment.

At the same time, enlargement remains one of the most imprecise and controversial EU policies. Reaching consensus on its principles and methodology has already proven to be extremely difficult in the case of the western Balkans and Turkey (Grabbe and Aktoudianakis 2022; Džankić et al. 2018; Fenko and Stal 2018; Karacarska 2018; Vachudova 2018; Zhelyazkova et al. 2018; Plachkova 2019; Gateva 2015). This will be challenged even further by the applications of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova with their urging for fast-track membership in response to the new geopolitical circumstances.

The controversy and uncertainty of enlargement policy are tightly connected with the results of the eastern enlargement process which, as experienced today, appear sub-optimal. Concerns with the outcomes of this enlargement round have led to the creation of a new, rapidly evolving enlargement methodology which stresses the importance of achieving results in ‘fundamental democratic, rule of law and economic reforms’, rather than legal harmonisation (European Commission 2020). This declaration in itself shows that there is an understanding of the presence in the preceding accession process of a major methodological weakness.

Calls for such a change in approach towards the western Balkans are also becoming more frequent in the academic world as the process unfolds (Dimitrov and Plachkova 2020; Džankić et al. 2018; Fenko and Stal 2018; Vachudova 2018; Karacarska 2018; Koneska 2018; Hillion 2004; Dimitrov 2022; Plachkova 2019; Veleva 2018). The majority of such calls, however, seem to neglect the lessons learnt from the eastern enlargement process and focus narrowly on the problems that the current applicant and potential applicant states are experiencing (Bieber 2018; Džankić et al. 2018; Fenko and Stal 2018; Karacarska 2018; Kmezić 2018; Koneska 2018; Zhelyazkova et al. 2018; Haughton 2007). In contrast, Džankić et al. (2018) refer to ‘the failure of conditionality’ in regard to its applicability to western Balkan states, claiming that the fundamental differences between the two enlargement rounds make conditionality, ‘proven’ to be the most effective instrument in the case of the accession of central and east European countries in the previous round (Grabbe and Aktoudianakis 2022; Zhelyazkova et al. 2018; Sedelmeier 2012; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005), no longer applicable.

This presumed effectiveness of conditionality is closely related to the taken-for-granted ‘power of attraction’ attached to the EU by both policy makers and academics. According to the dominant rational institutionalist rhetoric, the instrument of conditionality was deemed successful in preparations for enlargement to central and eastern Europe since it stemmed from the power asymmetry between the main actors in the process and the intrinsic interest of local governments in complying with the set conditions (Gateva 2015; Sedelmeier 2012; Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005).

The trends that evidence the ineffectiveness of this basic enlargement policy instrument regarding western Balkan states, such as cultural and societal mismatches, widespread political corruption related to the heritage and the uncertainties of the process itself (Džankić et al. 2018; Kmezić 2018; Zhelyazkova et al. 2018), all stem precisely from the reluctance of the local actors in charge to engage in an authentic Europeanisation.

These factors are, however, not unique to this enlargement round. On the contrary, because of the specific geopolitical circumstances in which the preparation for the accession of central and east European countries took place and the atmosphere of unpredictability, combined with strong momentum and the inherited perception of enlargement as ‘the most successful EU policy’ (Džankić et al. 2018; Góra 2017; Jovanović and Damnjanović 2014; Hillion 2010; Sedelmeier 2012; Grabbe 2006), these trends remained well hidden and unnoticed during the course of the eastern enlargement. They did, however, start to show on the surface with the preparations of

Bulgaria and Romania (Dimitrov 2022), giving grounds for questioning the ‘self-congratulatory rhetoric’ (Kochenov 2014) of the European Commission.

In order to build a strong enlargement policy, capable of achieving fundamentally different outcomes compared to the previous enlargement round (aiming at overall societal reform), it is vital to understand how the actual mechanisms of enlargement policy applied to the countries from central and eastern Europe led both to the upswing of this self-congratulatory rhetoric and to the specific results which do not justify it.

A key problem in the previous approach, which remained unnoticed until the completion of the process, is the extreme role of the European Commission as a political actor conducting what is effectively a discretionary policy (Dimitrov et al. 2013; Hillion 2010; Majone 2009), but hidden behind the claim of a completely strict, objective assessment process based on the merits of the candidate countries.¹ Considering this, it is particularly important to understand how the Commission perceives the specificities of the task of expanding to the respective accession countries and how it builds its interaction with them, based on this perception.

In this respect, the Bulgarian experience on the path to EU accession becomes extremely valuable for two main reasons:

1. Firstly, the Bulgarian case is an early warning sign of the failure of the basic mechanisms of an enlargement policy centred on conditionality.
2. Secondly, out of all the current EU Member States, Bulgaria is closest to the western Balkans in terms of history, culture and language.

The role of the European Commission as a leading actor in the process

Because of its particular role as part of the eastern enlargement but, at the same time, a very distinct case within it, a study of the Bulgarian experience provides the opportunity to understand the logic behind the evolution of the EU’s enlargement policy.

The majority of the academic literature, focused on the improvement in enlargement policy in regard to its applicability to future rounds of enlargement, seems to be dedicated to its technical, instrumental aspects (Bieber 2018; Fenko and Stal 2018; Karacarska 2018; Kmezić 2018; Koneska 2018; Zhelyazkova et al. 2018). However, the fundamentally political character of the interaction between the European Commission and the applicant country remains unobserved. Hence, the evolving character of the actors, leading the process in a dynamic environment of interrelations between their particular interests, values, beliefs and norms, remains marginalised. The roots of this problem are much deeper and derive from the very principles of European integration.

Majone demonstrates how this turbulent environment has shaped the dynamic of the ever-evolving integration process as a whole, leading to the prioritisation of economic integration:

1 ‘Accession is and will remain a merit-based process fully dependent on the objective progress achieved by each country.’ (European Commission 2018: 2).

... at the expense of all other core EU values, including democracy. (Majone 2009: 1)

This supreme priority attached to integration indicates the direction of the future development of the Union given that it is responsible in large part for the alienation of EU citizens. Thus, it sets the grounds for the ‘politicisation’ of the process because the political goals, against the background of the lack of democratic support, need to be achieved under the disguise of economic means. This logic of the integration process translates into the ‘EU operational code’ (Majone 2009) which navigates the overall functioning of the Union and shapes all individual EU policies, including enlargement.

The ‘politicisation’ of the integration process, emanating from the refusal of Member States to take ownership (Hillion 2004; Majone 2009), has resulted in the elevation of the legal and normative aspects of the integration process to a supreme level. This has led to an enhanced role for the European Commission as the ‘guardian of the treaties’. The monopoly of legislative initiatives granted to the Commission is, according to Majone:

... the clearest demonstration of the willingness to sacrifice democracy on the altar of integration. (Majone 2009)

The contradiction between the political aims and the need for non-political tools to achieve them, which is the essence of the ‘Monnet method’ of integration (Majone 2009), seems to lie at the heart of all EU processes and policies. Eastern enlargement has, however, created conditions that have greatly accelerated this basic dilemma.

Under the leadership of the European Commission, the preparation of central and east European countries for EU membership saw enlargement policy undergo a transition from a legally-regulated procedure to a discretionary policy serving the interests of the Member States and the Commission (Hillion 2010; Hillion 2004; Majone 2009). This emanates from the geopolitical meaning attached to the enlargement process as a solution to the security threats in Europe. In a time of overall uncertainty and tension in regard to the future of European integration, the concrete issues around EU enlargement have become a very important element of the overall complexity concerning the development of the EU. The specific questions related to the number of new members that can accede, which ones, what criteria they should meet, how this affects the functioning of the EU and how it affects the potential deepening of EU integration – all issues which have a political character (Vachudova 2005) – seem impossible to be resolved between the Member States themselves.

In this context, the Commission stands out as the only ‘objective’ actor which is capable of handling the process and which has practical experience in terms of the preparations for previous enlargement rounds. The intrinsically political character of the process, however, dooms its approach to one of subjectivity (Vachudova 2005; Smith 2003). The Commission’s inherited expertise has created a tendency towards continuity and, thus, it hides the unprecedented character of the fundamentally geopolitical task of acceding a large number of countries with incompatible, even conflicting, political, economic and societal models. The job of the Commission has

become one of resolving the political matter, of serving the interests of Member States (Hillion 2010), with non-political tools.

This sets the framework for its peculiar, controversial and all-encompassing role which will be examined in our empirical analysis of the particular case of Bulgaria's EU accession.

Empirical analysis

This article makes an attempt to reconstruct the logic of the eastern enlargement process, focusing on the peculiar role of the main EU actor – the European Commission, as the architect and executor of enlargement policy. In the academic literature on Europeanisation the Commission is referred to as the 'engine' of EU enlargement (Grabbe 2006; Smith 2003) and as 'the key locomotive pulling the enlargement process along' (Hughes et al. 2005: 166). This notion tacitly implies that applicant countries are, more or less, wagons being pulled along. Yet, in contrast, they are active participants in a political interaction with the Commission and, therefore, it is very important to identify the specific 'mental maps' through which such agents construct the flexible pattern of their modes of action. The structures of implied political perceptions are crucially important for the eventual success or failure, or the only superficial success, of the accession interaction. These structures must be identified empirically and then analysed in terms of their compatibility.

Sources and research method

To approach the research, we have combined a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the empirical data which we collected through two different sources, considered to be representative of the mental maps constructed by political agents on both sides:

- 46 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, conducted with highest-level politicians (prime ministers, deputy prime ministers, ministers of foreign affairs, other ministers, diplomats and specialists) who participated in Bulgaria's preparation process for EU membership.

For the purposes of this article, analysis is based on respondents' answers to the following question:

In your opinion, is it true that the European Commission was 'Bulgaria's best friend' in the process of preparation for EU membership?²

- an in-depth interview with Günter Verheugen, the Commissioner for Enlargement under Romano Prodi's presidency of the European Commission (1999-2004)

2 The interviews were conducted in a joint study carried out by a research team from the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence at the Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' and the Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute at MoFA. The project was carried out by Professor Ingrid Shikova, Professor Georgi Dimitrov, Associate Professor Mirela Veleva, Lubomira Popova, Biliana Decheva and Svetlozar Kovachev.

Analysis of the discourses on Bulgarian participation for EU membership is carried out in three stages for each source. Firstly, all the different semantic, axiologic, emotive and verbal aspects of individual interpretations in the answers are identified. The second stage sees these aspects grouped and ordered in such a way that they form a meaningful, integrated entity. Finally, those aspects that are considered most relevant in developing an understanding of the specificities of the role of the Commission in terms of its main political priorities, goals, policy tasks and means, and the specific way in which it handles the overall interaction process, are selected and analysed quantitatively in terms of the ratio between logically oppositional categories.

Through the results of this analysis, the article explains the underlying pattern of political interaction in the course of the preparation of central and east European countries for EU membership and the connection this has with current performance in these countries in terms of democracy, rule of law, quality of life and economic wellbeing.

Main conceptual indicators

The first part of the empirical analysis is based on data retrieved from interviews with participants on the Bulgarian side. Here, the analysis covers the full spectrum of perceptions about the Commission's roles, according to the following conceptual indicators:

- perceptions of the political standing of the Commission:
 - closeness (e.g. 'we speak the same language')
 - distance (e.g. 'the Commission speaks Brussels language')
- Commission requirements
 - reform-oriented (e.g. a 'functioning border control system') vs. oriented towards legal harmonisation (e.g. 'it was necessary to adopt legislation in each individual field')
 - clear (e.g. 'the requirements were clear'; 'they explained their position') vs. unclear (e.g. 'no-one explained anything to us'; 'we were left to understand everything on our own')
 - consistent (e.g. 'it was clearly explained what exactly needed to be done in order to fulfil the criteria') vs. inconsistent (e.g. 'constant change in the Commission's position'; 'comments being made *post factum*')
- application of the European Commission's political programmes:
 - consistent (e.g. 'well-targeted funding') vs. inconsistent (e.g. 'it was not clear who was responsible')
 - useful (e.g. 'the Commission ensures that Bulgarian universities, for example, will be supported too') vs. useless (e.g. 'complete bullshit')
- the specific parameters of the interaction process:
 - showing power asymmetry between the actors (e.g. 'the Commission has always sought ways to demonstrate superiority') vs. showing a relationship of equal partners (e.g. 'Bulgaria worked well with the European Commission'; 'our most distinctive partner'; 'a question of mutual interest')

- unilateral mode of action (e.g. ‘the Commission gives direction’; ‘rates our progress’; ‘they gave 40 million’) vs. bilateral interaction (e.g. ‘they were cooperative’; ‘there was interaction’)
- effective interaction (e.g. ‘my experience with the Commission was successful’) vs. ineffective interaction (e.g. the ‘Brussels administration’).³

The analysis then moves on to data contained in the second information source – an interview with the then Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen. The following conceptual indicators will be covered:

- perceptions about the standing of the European Commission:
 - dominant player (e.g. ‘the Commission can put pressure on Member States’; ‘the Member States follow the recommendations of the Commission’) vs. dependent on the Member States (e.g. ‘the Member States give the mandate to do ...’)
 - alternating actor (e.g. ‘enlargement was the highlight for his Commission’; ‘it was already another Commission’) vs. constant actor (‘it is true that the Commission was Bulgaria’s best friend throughout the process’)
- the Commission’s approach:
 - consistent (e.g. ‘we said at the very beginning, as far as the timetable is concerned, that we would probably leave Bulgaria and Romania with a little more time for preparation than for the others’) vs. inconsistent (e.g. ‘at the end of the whole thing I said: “We need to have a safeguard here”; ‘it was already another Commission, another Commission President, that tried everything to make a minor event of it and even to cover it up a little bit’)

Results of the empirical analysis

Source 1: interviews with the Bulgarian participants

The complexity of the process of the preparation of Bulgaria for EU membership already becomes evident at the initial stage of the analysis, with the identification of no fewer than 1374 individual semantic accents. This is quite symptomatic of the nebulous character of enlargement preparations, considering that the closed format and narrow focus of the question itself does not suggest a wide range of interpretations. Classification of the different aspects further reconfirms this intricacy as it shows a complex structure of actors, interests, motives and patterns of interaction.

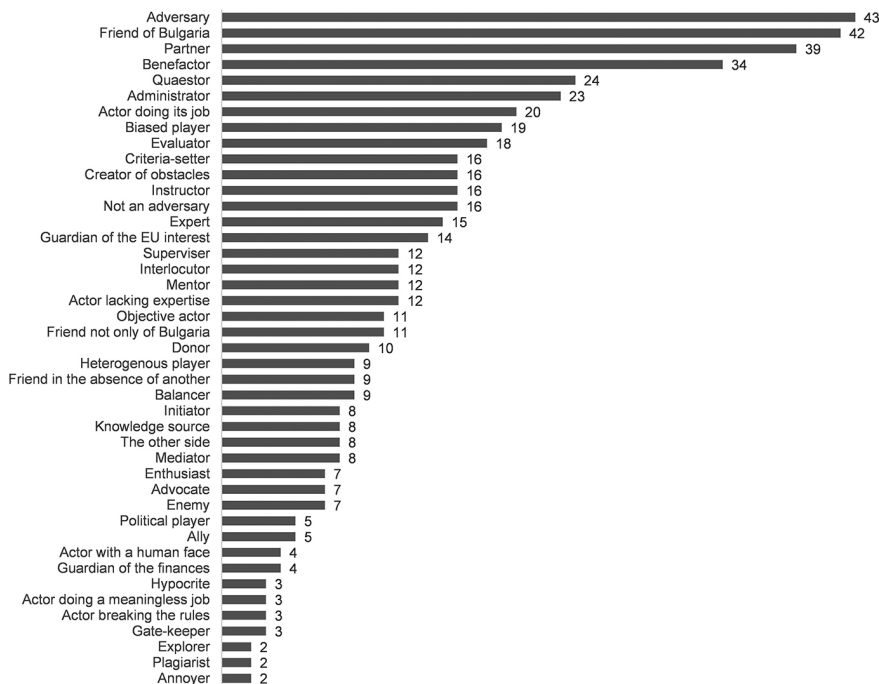
The majority of the semantic accents recognised in the analysis (actually about 70 per cent) are closely related to the intricate function of the European Commission in the process, with the remaining 30 per cent covering other aspects such as the geopolitical context, the specific mode of working of the Bulgarian team and personal memories. This high level of accents covering the issue of the Commission does not come as a surprise, considering the formulation of the question.

In order to attain a better understanding of the characteristics of this particular actor, we look at the full spectrum of its roles which are present in the answers of the

3 i.e. its bureaucratic mode of operation.

respondents and the concentration of the semantic accents where these highlight the Commission in terms of one or multiple of its roles in the process:

Figure 1 – respondents’ interpretations of the role of the European Commission



The data in Figure 1 shows the highest concentration of interpretative aspects on the role ‘adversary’, followed by ‘friend’, ‘partner’ and ‘benefactor’ with ‘not an adversary’ just a few places behind these. The dominance of this semantic cluster can only partially be explained by the wording of the question. More interestingly, this is the group with the broadest general meaning, expressing a value-laden attitude rather than specific policy functions. Limiting the role of the Commission in this group of images, respondents refrained from discussing any details in regard to the main characteristics of this actor, its specific functions and the mode of interaction in the day-to-day tasks of accession preparations.

The contradiction between ‘Commission as friend’ and ‘Commission as non-friend’ is at the core of the complex issue regarding the role of this actor in the integration process of central and east European countries and, in particular, of Bulgaria. On the one hand, the Commission had to complete the process successfully in order to protect its position in the EU’s institutional structure and against the backdrop of the EU’s interests. This imperative success made it a due ‘friend’. Not surprisingly, many respondents shared the view that the Commission was interested in Bulgaria’s advancement in the process (interviews 2, 4, 27, 33, 37 and 41). At the same time,

the Commission had been assigned a political task by Member States each of which were monitoring the implementation of their own national political agenda (Hillion 2010). This circumstance made the Commission also an adversary, even an enemy – ‘it cannot be a friend because it is on the other side’ (interview 4); ‘because it looks after the interests of the Member States’ (interview 7); ‘because it represents the Member States in the process’ (interviews 2 and 24).

With a high statistical ranking (position 5), coming right after the role of ‘benefactor’ is the role of ‘quaestor’, receiving 24 references. Among the roles which carry specific meaning regarding the specificities of the interaction process, this is the one which is most highly represented. According to respondents, the Commission ‘controls’, ‘monitors’, ‘does not give a hint’ (interviews 40 and 41). Here it becomes evident that, through the Commission’s role as ‘gatekeeper’, the process was reduced to one of ‘fulfilling the requirements’; attempts were not, instead, directed towards the complex processes of social transformation and Europeanisation which the Commission should have been supporting through its policies and mechanisms. On the contrary, effort was reduced to monitoring progress against specific criteria.

It does not come as a surprise that the next role in terms of priority is that of ‘administrator’, with a difference of only one reference. Instead of resolving the major political and economic problems which needed to be overcome in order to achieve authentic Europeanisation, the Commission’s efforts were dedicated to ‘copying documents’, ‘making information checks’ and ‘administering’ (interviews 42 and 45). This is the clearest evidence of the glaringly technocratic character of the entire process. The next role in terms of the number of references refers to the Commission ‘simply doing its job’ – another example of the priority attached to the technocratic aspect.

The next role – the one of ‘biased player’, with 19 references – leads us back to the specific character of the unprecedented task assigned to the Commission. It needed to solve the political dilemma of securing peace on the continent with non-political means, and thus aimed at ‘market integration’ by ‘rule transfer’. The mechanisms at its disposal ought to have been applied consistently if they were to be effective but the political stake attached to this task hindered their application on a consistent basis. It is this specific nature of the interaction with Bulgaria that made the Commission appear ‘biased’ more often than ‘objective’.

The following group – with 18 and 16 references respectively – represents the roles of an ‘evaluator’ (‘the evaluation of the Commission matters’; ‘the evaluation of the Commission is important to the Member States’); and the role of an actor which ‘sets the requirements’ or ‘makes the rules’ (interview 25). Through this duality in its role, the European Commission was able to secure the necessary ‘leeway’ (Smith 2001) for the predominantly political considerations which lie in the decision-making process of how to ‘score’ the candidates. The transition from objectively registered non-equivocal facts to the political evaluation of preparedness nevertheless remained a ‘black box’ one in which the magic of political discretion took place.

These considerations are closely related to the perceptions of the Bulgarian participants in the EU accession about the role of the Commission as a ‘creator of obstacles’, which comes next with 16 references (the Commission ‘creates difficulties’,

‘sets up barriers’, ‘so many barriers that no other country before us had to undertake’ (interviews 10, 27 and 46)). This is supplemented by the role of ‘gate-keeper’ (‘selling tickets at the entrance’ (interview 46)). The axiologically opposite role, of ‘instructor’, received 14 references, complemented by that of ‘mentor’ and a ‘source of knowledge’, with 12 and 8 each. Not surprisingly, the heavier weight falls on the first formulation which complements the previous two roles discussed. Precisely because the Commission guided every single step of the process, it appeared as ‘hypocritical’, ‘biased’ and ‘incoherent’ where its assessment of a particular step was negative. At the same time, when an evaluation was positive, it of course received full credit, becoming the ‘friend’ who ‘pats us on the back’.

The closely-related role of ‘mentor’ is the much more proactive version in which the Commission not only ‘instructs’ but becomes the driving force, ‘setting direction’ and ‘advising’. It is no coincidence that this role is also less represented among our interviewees.

In the next place, with 15 references, comes the role of ‘expert’. It is interesting to note that this role does not occupy one of the leading positions. According to the academic literature, providing expertise was a main function of the work of the Commission (Gateva 2015; Sedelmeier 2012; Grabbe 2006; Smith 2003), but this remained somewhat marginal in the memories of the Bulgarian participants in the process. Even more interestingly, the opposite role – that of a player with a shortage of expertise – received almost the same number of references. According to 12 different interpretations, the Commission ‘did not have the capacity’ and its representatives ‘only pretended they understood’ (interviews 24 and 29).

The collision between these images provides the clearest evidence of the incompatibility between the Commission’s expertise and its instruments for the Europeanisation of the post-communist states. This fact again stems from the specific political function of the Commission in the process – it was assigned an unprecedented political task that did not match its standard toolkit. The Commission of course did have experience in preparing the previous enlargements of the European Community/European Union, to the west, south and north. The task back then, however, was somewhat different – to implement market integration, not to achieve radical societal transformation. Therefore, the previous experience and instruments at its disposal were completely incompatible with the large-scale task that needed to be solved during the eastern enlargement. Hence, the dual role of an ‘expert’ which was actually lacking in expertise.

Next in the ranking in terms of number of references is the role of ‘guardian of the community interest’. This role expresses the function of the Commission in protecting EU Member States from the threats posed by central and east European countries to the level of integration in the Union which had already been achieved (Landaburu 2007; Smith 2003; Maresceau 1994). If we assume that the ranking represents the structure of perceptions about the complexity of the Commission’s role, it is evident that, from Bulgaria’s point of view, protection of the EU’s particular interests does not stand as a prime priority. This comes as a result of the entire EU enlargement being perceived in terms of values but not of practical considerations, as demonstrated below.

Lastly, the role of ‘supervisor’, with 12 references, should be noted. In some respects, this complements the category of ‘gate-keeper’ and ‘creator of obstacles’. Here the Commission ‘is critical’, ‘waves a finger’, ‘sharpens its tongue’ (interviews 4, 12, 28 and 34). The need to have such a role stems from the Bulgarian side’s tendency to show ‘resistance’.

The rest of the roles identified received fewer than ten references each and, in this sense, they should not be considered to reflect the main functions of the Commission in the interaction process. However, their diversity by itself characterises the Commission as an actor – controversial, multifunctional, unclear and inconsistent, just like the process itself was vague and undefinable, creating the need for such a semi-discretionary political player with vague, complex and comprehensive functions.

This complexity, controversy and multi-dimensionality of the Commission’s role became obvious only after examining the whole structure of the participants’ discourse. In the perceptions of individual respondents, the Commission’s image was simplified as one or another of its functions took priority, depending on the dimensions of the interaction with the specific participant. The clearest proof of this simplistic mode of thinking is the very low concentration of semantic accents on the role of ‘diverse player’. In only nine interpretations did a focus fall on the structure of functions and specified actors within the European Commission, in answers where it was perceived as ‘different according to the period’ or ‘to its mode of operation’ (interviews 24 and 39), or where it was ‘dependent on the Commissioner’ or ‘made up of people’ with different goals and interests (interviews 11, 29 and 39). This appears in huge contrast to all the other interpretations which present the Commission as a generalised ‘single player’ with a clear purpose, functions, strategy and mode of action.

Considering this hidden multi-dimensionality and controversy in the role of the Commission, it is interesting to look at the prevailing interpretations that shape it by characteristic disproportions in the structure of the applied mental map. Here, the ratio highlights the relationship between the word pairs; while the marker on the lines is positioned to highlight the relative share of each one in the total number of mentions accorded to each pair.

perceptions about the Commission’s: distance/closeness (7.5:1)

distant (15) ————— || — **close (2)** —

Clearly, according to the structure of respondents’ perceptions, the Commission was overwhelmingly foreign and distant. In only two interpretations was a focus placed on ‘speaking a common language’ and ‘being open [for partnership]’ (interviews 16 and 20). In contrast, there is a wealth of interpretations according to which the Commission was ‘unintelligible’, ‘speaking Brussels language’, ‘using Brussels vocabulary’ and ‘Brussels’ way of communication’ (interviews 11, 24, 27, 40 and 46). This is yet further testimony that, in the preparation of Bulgaria for EU membership, the leading actor on the other side of the interaction – the European Commission – remained misunderstood by its main partners.

After reviewing the general aspects of the multi-dimensional role of the European Commission in the Bulgarian integration process, the following graphics focus on the characteristics of the Commission's requirements and programmes.

Firstly, we study the extent to which these requirements were oriented towards legal harmonisation or towards deep, Europeanising reforms:

**perceptions about the EC's programmes:
oriented towards legal harmonisation; or reform-oriented (3.7:1)**

legal harmonisation (11) ————— || ————— reform (3)

The interpretations which show the requirements of the Commission as being oriented towards legal harmonisation exceed those with a focus on reform by a factor of nearly four. This perception is not instructed by the academic literature but by respondents' own practical experience. It leaves very little room for doubt as to what was the basic priority in the accession preparations.

This is an expression of the overall tendency towards a political simplification of the process – the goal of achieving authentic Europeanisation looked more and more unattainable as the process progressed and, therefore, it was minimised to the extent that reforms were replaced by a 'transfer of rules' although local observers who carried out non-governmental monitoring of the preparations repeatedly insisted on the need for the opposite (Bokova and Popova 2000, 2001, 2002).

It is interesting to track the extent to which these requirements – although simplified in some sense to adopting the list of the *acquis* – are perceived by participants from the Bulgarian side as 'clear' and 'consistent'. Here is what the interpretative axis, examining these characteristics of the Commission's approach, shows:

perceptions about the conditions: unclear/clear (1.9:1)

unclear (13) ————— || ————— clear (7)

This graphic clearly shows that, although reduced to a transfer of legislation, the Commission's requirements were perceived as predominantly 'unclear' ('it was not clear what exactly was going on'; 'nobody explained to us') and, even more often, as 'inconsistent' ('they make up the rules'; 'they change the rules'; 'no matter what we do, they say, "Ah, well, yes, but..."'). Even the most specific aspect of the accession conditions – the written rules – remained unclear for the Bulgarian team, at least in terms of the 'entry requirements'.

The following graphic shows the results regarding the Bulgarian team's perceptions of the application of the programmes that the Commission initiated in support of Bulgaria in its preparation for membership:

perceptions about the programmes: inconsistent/consistent (4.7:1)

inconsistent (14) ————— || ————— consistent (3)

Here the dominance of interpretative accents that express impressions of 'inconsistency' makes a strong demonstration – the ratio is almost 5:1. To the representa-

tives of the Bulgarian team, the experts from the Commission ‘when all the work is done, say: “Ah-hah; but there are some changes...” (interview 28); ‘it was not clear what exactly was going on’; ‘it was not clear who was in charge’ (interviews 27 and 40).

The result is similar and in close logical consistency when it comes to perceptions in regard to the usefulness of enlargement programmes:

perceptions about the programs: useless/useful (4,4:1)

useless (22) ————— || ————— useful (5)

According to our respondents, ‘the Commission did not have the people to implement all these projects’; ‘the Commission is writing some things that cannot possibly happen’; ‘the western expert writes mostly nonsense’ (interviews 11, 24 and 40). It is pretty clear what level of enthusiasm and inspiration for the implementation of the programmes would be created by such perceptions.

The results of the two comparisons above show that, when the specific parameters of the day-to-day work on accession are examined, the more pronounced become the ambiguity and the inconsistency. At first glance, this seems illogical but, in fact, it does have a solid explanation which is rooted precisely in the logic of the process. As it progressed, the uncertainty increased because of the multiple transformations that were going on – the task needed to be simplified as much as possible in order to become solvable but, at the same time, inconsistency was also a necessary condition due to the political nature of the entire process. With the reduction of the task down to the practicalities, the ambiguity, uncertainty and inconsistency in the approach became more noticeable and then appeared much more to the fore.

The dominance of the ‘inefficiency’ and ‘uselessness’ categories is also highly recognisable in a more specific dimension. When the Commission’s role is considered at a more general, abstract level, it was more often perceived as ‘helpful’ and ‘friendly’; when its specific functions are examined through the prism of the day-to-day work, then it was precisely the impossibility of achieving effective communications with this institution that came to the surface – to understand the criteria; to understand why and how the Commission works; ‘who does what’; and ‘what is expected of us’ (interview 39).

This conclusion leads us to the next section of the analysis where we discuss the characteristics describing the interaction between the European Commission and the Bulgarian negotiating team.

Now the functions of the Commission have been clarified, the research examines the position from which this institution participated in the process. We trace whether the majority of individual interpretations describe a relationship of power asymmetry (such as ‘the Commission always looked for a way to demonstrate its superiority’ (interview 38) and ‘the party that conforms to the criteria is not on the admitting side’ (interview 35)) or one which presents the two sides in the process as equal partners (‘our most visible partner’; ‘they treated us with respect’ (interviews 5 and 39)). Additionally, we check whether, in the perceptions of the participants, the interaction was either unilateral (‘they correct you in the direction you are moving’ (interview

30) or ‘they chased us’ (interview 44) or bilateral (‘constructive dialogue’; ‘they listen to our arguments’; ‘the Commission worked together with the Bulgarian experts’ (interviews 19, 34 and 39)).

**perceptions of the interaction process:
power asymmetry/equal partnership (4.4:1)**

power (106) ————— || ————— **equal (24)**
asymmetry partnership

unilateral/bilateral (2.5:1)

unilateral (69) ————— || ————— **bilateral (28)**

These graphics show that the two sides in the process interacted under a massively perceived presumption of power asymmetry – a problem which is at the core not only of enlargement policy but also of the mainstream literature on Europeanisation (Schimmelfennig 2012; Sedelmeier 2011; Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Smith 2003). This is a serious problem considering that even the title of the post-accession instrument introduced for Bulgaria and Romania was the ‘cooperation and verification mechanism’; that is, that it was cooperation that was prioritised. However, this mechanism was a direct continuation of the political approach from the pre-accession phase; and, therefore, there was practically no actual cooperation (Dimitrov et al. 2013).

This predetermined position of inequality reflects on the very nature of the interaction between the two main actors. The classification of interpretative accents shows that, according to the collective memory of the Bulgarian negotiating team members, the interaction was ‘one-sided’ – the Commission ‘corrected’, ‘gave direction’, ‘set criteria’ and ‘expressed an opinion on our progress’.

Having established the position that the two main actors occupied in the interaction process, we turn next to the perceptions of the participants regarding its effectiveness:

**perceptions of the interaction process:
ineffective/effective (1.6:1)**

ineffective (54) ————— || ————— **effective (34)**

First of all, it must be emphasised that there is a large number of references on this major point – 88 in total. Furthermore, the interpretative accents which define the interaction as ineffective outweigh those that characterise it as effective by nearly 60 per cent. For the participants in the process, the representatives of the Commission ‘tried to explain’ but ‘they use Brussels vocabulary’ and we ‘did not understand anything at first’ (interviews 24, 40 and 46). One of the respondents shared that ‘there have also been cases where they told us: “We will not negotiate now”, without any explanation’ (interview 35), while another spoke about a ‘relationship crisis’ (interview 28). Of course, there is also the opposite point of view according to which

the representatives of the Commission ‘go into details’ and ‘were very instrumental’ (interviews 5 and 37), but this can be observed more than 1.5 times less.

The dual role of the Commission is again evident here – depending on the specific issues, its interest can be directed towards a more efficient and quick solution which implies a search for effective communications. In the opposite case, when the Commission needed to save time, thwart political disagreements or simply slow down the process, it was logical that the communications led by this actor would be judged as ‘inefficient’.

The Commission was the only clearly identifiable interlocutor on the EU side, responsible for the conduct of the process and for communicating daily with the representatives of the Bulgarian team. Therefore, this dominance of perceptions of ineffectiveness in communication in fact determined the prospects of achieving a shared result – under it, the chances of reaching a common goal were very slim. Ineffective communication was a consequence of the overall uncertainty of the process and the floating end goal, this being dependent on the political considerations. It was the specific role that the Commission occupied that established the tendency towards ‘simplification’, with a view to faster completion. This, however, cannot substitute for a deficiency in substantive meaning.

Source 2: interview with the Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen

This article has so far presented the leading characteristics of the perceptions of the European Commission, as a main actor in the Bulgarian preparation for EU membership, and the dimensions of its interactions with the Bulgarian team, according to how the Bulgarian participants saw it. Our analysis now turns to the perceptions of ‘the other side’ in the process, using as an empirical source an interview conducted with the Enlargement Commissioner for the period 1999-2004, Günter Verheugen.

Günter Verheugen is widely credited for the significant role he played in the successful completion of the process (Gateva 2015; Landaburu 2007; Ludlow 2004).⁴ It is widely believed that, thanks to his exceptional commitment to the ‘political cause’, the whole process took on a different meaning and dimension for both the candidate and the Member States alike. The role of the Commission changed dramatically during his mandate, becoming a much more active ‘partner’ in the enlargement process, while simultaneously increasing its weight in the overall EU institutional structure (Grabbe 2006; Hughes et al. 2005; Vachudova 2005; O’Brennan 2006).

Although it is impossible to draw conclusions about the perceptions of ‘the EU’ as a whole from the viewpoint of a single actor, the key role that Verheugen personally played in the formation of the strategy, as well as the vision and the objectives of the eastern enlargement, makes a study of his memories particularly useful.

4 However, his input to the eastern enlargement does not get univocal acclaim (Gallagher 2009; Gallagher 2005).

Interview summary

Before we move to the empirical findings, we present here a summary of the 13.5-page interview, designed to achieve maximum commensurability with the interviews of the Bulgarian participants in the EU's eastern enlargement. This is a necessary step because the political meaning of these memories can be partially lost in the procedure of typologising the individual semantic accents.

As an introduction, Verheugen recalled that, at the time he took the post of Enlargement Commissioner, 'Bulgaria was not foreseen as a country that should be a member in the foreseeable future'. The geopolitical situation and, in particular, the conflicts in the Balkans gave grounds for the Commissioner to convince the Member States to change that enlargement strategy since the entire endeavour of EU enlargement was, in the first place, geopolitical ('the whole thing was geopolitical').

A condition for the inclusion of Bulgaria in the process, however, was the achievement of consensus on the closure of the third and fourth units of the Kozloduy nuclear power plant. It became clear that this was an issue which had an overtly political character. Explaining that he was not a technician, the Commissioner shared that, from his point of view, the condition 'was not totally fair'. The issue was met with resentment on the part of the Bulgarian government which, nevertheless, agreed to a memorandum of understanding without an entirely clear time commitment so that the 'window of opportunity' could be used and the process begun.

Making a comparison with other countries from the eastern enlargement, the Commissioner noted that Bulgaria 'was not much more different'. However, the reform process in Bulgaria and Romania had, generally, been slower.

Verheugen recalled that 'in 2003 and 2004 the mood for enlargement was already a little bit changing'. He noted the concerns of individual countries regarding the judicial systems and level of political corruption in Bulgaria and Romania. It became clear that the introduction of a safeguard clause in the Accession Treaty of Bulgaria and Romania was precisely a mechanism to deal with these sentiments in EU Member States.

The Commissioner also touched upon the topic of the balance of power in the European Union, claiming that France was trying to use the process of enlargement to Bulgaria and Romania as a means of opposing the growing influence of Germany. According to the Commissioner, French 'support' for Bulgaria and Romania was precisely an expression of this strategy and 'had nothing to do' with the two countries.

The growing role of the Commission in the process was also discussed in the interview. The Commissioner presented EU enlargement as an opportunity for the Commission to 'exercise strong leadership', to establish itself as a dominant institution and to make a quantum leap in the political history of European integration.

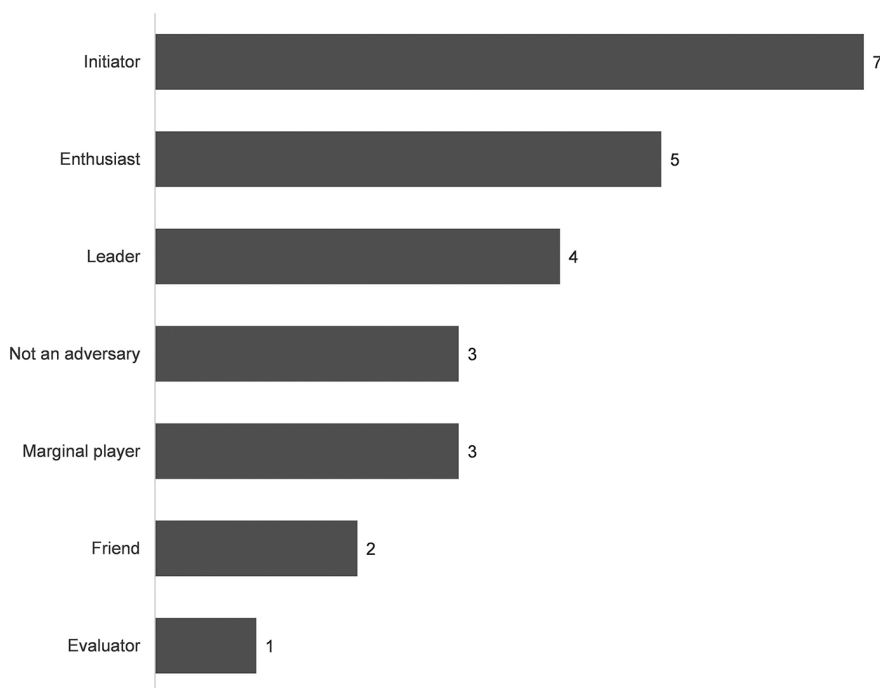
The issue of relations with Russia also found its place. The main emphasis was put on the need for active communication with Russia as an interested actor. This question was discussed in the context of global politics, in which this author shares Verheugen's opinion that 'the geopolitical context is so poisoned now'. This led to his final conclusion, namely that future enlargement of the EU would be extremely difficult.

Empirical results

The text of the interview is studied as a discursive entity in the same topological order as the one presenting the Bulgarian viewpoint. Hence, the analytical procedures are precisely the same.

As a first step, we look semantically at the different roles of the Commission which are recognised in the structure of all the answers, comparing them to those already identified through the memories of the Bulgarian participants. This analysis brings to the fore the seven roles identified in Figure 2:

Figure 2 – Günter Verheugen’s interpretations of the role of the European Commission



At first glance, this number of options (25) seems rather insignificant compared to the huge variety of interpretations found in the structure of answers from interviews with the Bulgarian respondents. Considering that all seven roles are identified in the memories of a single actor, however, this becomes another strong testimony for the complex and multidimensional role played by the Commission. Even in the memories of the Enlargement Commissioner himself, the Commission was both a leader and a marginal player; mostly an initiator but also a political evaluator against its own, institutionally set, discretionary criteria. It is clear that the most prevalent role

was that of ‘initiator’; this strengthens the ambitions of this institution to prove itself a leading player in the political field of the EU and international relations.

Another interesting point is that the main roles recognised in the analysis of the memories of the participants from the Bulgarian side cannot be identified here. The only exception is the pair ‘friend’ (‘it is true that the Commission was Bulgaria’s best friend in the process’) and ‘not an adversary’ (‘the Commission’s approach was not hostile’) each of which have two or three variations in semantic accent. These interpretations can also be explained by the specific wording of one of the questions which directly asked whether the Commission was Bulgaria’s best friend in the process. Despite the specific wording, it is among the least represented roles in the structure of semantic accents.

Having looked at the main roles played by the Commission according to its Enlargement Commissioner, the next step is to explore the specific characteristics of its enlargement policy. Considering the high priority of the topic regarding the weight of the Commission in the overall EU institutional structure, it is interesting to check whether, according to the perceptions of the Commissioner himself, this was a leading institution in the process or one which was predominantly dependent on the Member States:

perceptions about the EC: leading institution/dependent on the Member States (2.3:1)

leading (7) ————— || ————— dependent (3)
institution institution

The data show that, in the Commissioner’s perceptions, the Commission was largely a leading player which could ‘exercise strong leadership’ and which ‘put pressure on the Member States’ which, in turn, ‘followed the Commission’s recommendations’ despite the recognised limitation of its mandate to act according to the interests and the political will of the Member States.

It is even more interesting to trace whether the role of this institution was perceived as homogeneous or heterogeneous. Here’s what the data show:

heterogeneous/homogeneous actor (5.7:1)

heterogeneous (17) ————— || ————— homogeneous (3)

As this graphic demonstrates, the Commission was perceived as a heterogeneous actor which constantly changed in the course of the process. When it came to the finalisation of the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, for example, Günter Verheugen said that ‘it was already another Commission’, ‘it was already another Commission President’ and the general approach was completely different – ‘it tried everything to make it into a minor event and even to cover it up a little bit’.

This distinction is very interesting as it proves once again the centrality of the political figures in the process – they can change policies and directions in the overall approach, shift the balance of power between institutions and change the priority of certain issues. Thus, just as the process itself was dynamic and constantly changing,

so were the actors who led it; these also changed along with the process while, at the same time, also being responsible for altering and shaping its overall course.

The growing influence of the institution itself with the beginning of the eastern enlargement is also evident in the text. The Commissioner noted that ‘if you look at the history of the European Commissions in the last 20 or 25 years what comes to your mind? What do you remember? What has the Commission achieved? Not very much...’. Thus, the pressing geopolitical task for the accession of central and east European countries to the EU presents an opportunity for the Commission to establish its leading role in the process and, hence, in the institutional structure of the Union. This is well explored in the academic literature (Dimitrov and Haralampiev 2022; Veleva 2017; Dimitrov 2016; Grabbe 2006; Hughes et al. 2005) and, in this sense, Verheugen’s memories are important as a testimony to the conscious approach which was embedded in this political repositioning.

This is also closely related to the respondent’s perceptions of his personal role – on the one hand, his responsibility was to implement the preparations for enlargement. On the other, Verheugen needed to turn the Commission into a leading institution – to prove its ability ‘to take the lead in the EU’. This also explains his image as the biggest ‘enthusiast’ for enlargement, dictated by the specifics of this dual role.

The next graphic depicts the perceived degree of consistency in the approach of this complex actor:

perceptions about the Commission’s approach: inconsistent/consistent (1.8:1)

inconsistent (7) ————— || ————— **consistent (4)**

It is apparent that, even according to the memories of this leading figure on the EU side, the approach of the Commission was more often perceived as inconsistent. The Commissioner remembered a number of situations when he needed to add new conditions, or to change the strategy ‘at the end of the whole thing’, in order to react according to the changing geopolitical environment. This is a clear demonstration of the dependence of the process on geopolitical factors to such an extent that they affected every single step in it. This was the core of the EU’s enlargement policy yet, on the other hand, geopolitical considerations doomed the whole policy to inconsistency and unpredictability.

Discussion of the empirical findings

Our empirical analysis shows extremely interesting results regarding the perceptions of the role of the European Commission in the Bulgarian negotiations process, the dimensions of the day-to-day work on accession and the effectiveness of the interaction with the Bulgarian team. The data shows that, for the Bulgarian participants, the Commission was a complex, unclear and inconsistent actor, occupying many often-conflicting functions and performing multiple and controversial roles. In the analysis of our interview with the Commissioner, this multidimensionality in the image of the EC is confirmed, but here the focus is placed on completely different functions – the Commission was, ultimately, described as an ‘initiator’, an ‘enthusiast’ and a ‘leader’.

These incompatible perceptions are the result of the different goals and objectives of the two sides in the process.

For the leading actors on the Bulgarian side, the goal was to achieve membership as soon as possible and at any price, because it seemed to be a ‘magic wand’ which would solve the problems of the post-communist transition. Therefore, the Commission could be a friend, partner, benefactor – depending on the way in which it assisted Bulgaria to advance in the negotiations. At the same time, for the Commission’s main partner in Bulgaria – the government and the political elite – it was important that this goal be achieved but without violating their positions of power and displacing the status quo. This excluded the implementation of authentic deep reforms. Therefore the Commission was ‘obstructive’, ‘the enemy’ and an ‘educator’ when ‘demanding results’.

For the Commission itself as an institution and for the Commissioner for Enlargement, the goal was completely different. Because of the complex political situation and the inability of the Member States to deal with the variety of problems which had an impact on the development of European integration, one element of which was the implementation of eastern enlargement, it occupied the central place in the process – as the ‘neutral player’ who must solve the political problems which the Member States could not cope with themselves. The ambition to prove itself as a leading institution explains why the internal perspective presents it above all else as an ‘initiator’, an ‘enthusiast’ and as a ‘leader’. At the same time, the task of preparing the process itself – an inherently political one – means that political considerations necessarily played a role. This also explains why the Commission’s approach is presented as predominantly ‘inconsistent’: this is just the other side of the coin to political discretion, well highlighted in both our empirical sources.

All this reaffirms the enormous complexity, ambiguity and indeterminacy of political interaction in the eastern enlargement of the EU – not only does it imply the simultaneously contradictory roles of the European Commission but, at the same time, these ‘roles’ were being interpreted by the two sides in a completely different way. This is also a testimony to the specificities of the process which imposed the central role on this institution. However, the Commission did not have the tools and expertise to carry out post-communist reforms in the accession countries and in which, as it became clear, success was mandatory. All of this created the conditions for minimising the task at the expense of the Europeanisation of those countries. The empirical evidence identifies the approach as predominantly ‘technocratic’ precisely because the task was simplified to the technical implementation of a list of requirements.

This politically induced simplification determined the final results of the preparation process. With the new, transformed aim characterising the efforts of both sides, the successful completion of the negotiations would not mean an authentic Europeanisation and an accomplishment of overall societal reform but, quite simply, a successful transfer of a list of rules. Thus, there was no substantive dimension behind the act of accession.

Conclusion

Our empirical findings demonstrate the dynamic, controversial and obscure role of the European Commission in the accession process which set the grounds for an incomprehensible and ineffective interaction with the Bulgarian participants in it. Because of the predominantly discretionary character of enlargement policy as conducted in practice, it was largely affected by trans-rational components including obscure values and strong emotions and, at the same time, a large amount of mutual misunderstanding arising from incompatible mental cards and the different initial goals, aims and tasks related to the preparation process: on the side of the Commission – geopolitical security issues; and on that of the candidate countries – domestic political issues of stabilisation and access to the financial resources to meet current needs.

All of this remained unnoticed during the entire preparatory period because of the priority shared by both sides regarding the speedy completion of the accession process. This, however, became achievable only at the cost of neglecting the issue of ensuring that Europeanisation was properly rooted in the approaches of the accession countries. Hence, the reversibility of the reforms which were undertaken is a direct consequence of this approach to enlargement policy.

Ultimately, it is this failure that the EU enlargement strategy towards the western Balkan countries should necessarily remedy.

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