

# Fit for 35? Setting the scene for a new SIEPS Forum

Political scientists **Göran von Sydow** and **Valentin Kreilinger** set the scene for a new SIEPS forum on enlarging and reforming the EU. In short contributions, renowned experts will discuss major issues at stake.

**A**fter Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it took only a few days for Ukraine to submit its application for EU membership. As a result, the future enlargement of the EU suddenly rose to the top of the political agenda. Indeed, it is not only Ukraine that is now a candidate country; previously stalled processes with other candidate countries have also been revitalised.

## An EU of 35 members: a plausible scenario

This raises the issue – as in previous enlargement rounds – of whether the EU must first change internally. In this context, questions are raised about policies, the financial framework, decision-making rules, institutional arrangements and the treaties. Some argue that reforming EU governance is unnecessarily time-consuming and difficult, not least because there are many other challenges. Others refer to the concept of 'absorption capacity' and emphasise the risk that the EU will cease to function after enlargement unless it undertakes serious reforms.

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'Fit for 35' refers to an EU of 35 members, the current 27 plus 8 new members. In [the 'Fit for 35' volume](#), five scholars – Tanja Börzel, Sergio Fabbrini, Yves Mény, Sonja Puntischer Riekmann and Frank Schimmelfennig – developed their thoughts. At the same time, the Franco-German report 'Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century', commissioned by the two ministers for EU affairs and written by 12 independent experts, recommended amending the treaties, removing national vetoes in the remaining policy areas where the EU decides by unanimity (such as foreign policy and taxation), increasing the size of the EU budget and abandoning the principle of each country having its own commissioner.

The 'Fit for 35' Forum now aims at continuing the debate and invites short contributions that address the topic. The prospect of enlargement to a Union of 29, 32 or even 35 members raises the question of whether the EU needs to become fit for enlargement and, if so, what exactly it needs to do to become 'fit for 35'. What are the some of the major issues at stake?

## The link between enlargement and EU-internal reform

Is the EU willing and able to reform in order to welcome new members into the club? Or is the approach of simultaneously pursuing internal reform and enlargement doomed to failure? Are minor reforms such as an extension of qualified majority voting in the Council via the existing passerelle clauses, for example in certain areas of foreign policy and other policy fields, sufficient to make the EU 'fit for 35'? What about long-standing ideas for reforming the main EU institutions, making them more efficient or accountable? Is treaty change inevitable? What are the risks of enlargement without reform? Could the EU enlarge and continue to enlarge without reform?

Introducing more flexibility into a sometimes rigid system with procedures that would allow future EU member states to participate, possibly even in decision-making, would also require internal reforms. How could a gradual, functional and sectoral integration process before formal accession be designed? Would it be attractive for accession countries or be perceived as yet another waiting room?

### **Differentiated integration and a bigger overhaul of the institutions**

In terms of the broader institutional architecture, there are other organisations, fora and institutions beyond the EU of 27 member states that could prove useful in guiding and managing the process that will eventually lead to enlargement. What role can and should the European Political Community (EPC) play? Is it relevant to the enlargement process? Could EEA and EFTA become a useful preparatory stage for future EU members to get ready for accession? Are there other bodies with political or financial clout that could facilitate the path to EU membership?

Ideas for a multi-speed Europe with an outer circle and/or a federal core have been floated in the past. Does more internal differentiation now threaten the cohesion of the EU? Or is it necessary when the EU will have more than 30 members? Will the Euro area be the core of the EU? This kind of ideas have not been implemented yet but could be rediscovered or reinvented in the context of making the EU 'fit for 35'.

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### **Geopolitical considerations, budgetary consequences and the elections**

The renewed attention to enlargement comes with a geopolitical framing. It is closely linked to the ongoing debate on the EU's strategic autonomy and the next Strategic Agenda of the EU for 2024-2029. The 27 member states have been struggling to finance all the budgetary needs to support Ukraine. Can the EU embed the new geopolitical considerations that drive the enlargement into its existing processes? Are the 1993 Copenhagen criteria, which established a merit-based, politically managed accession process that takes into account the EU's 'absorption capacity', still the blueprint and benchmark to be kept in mind? Where could new financial resources be found? And how would the financial transfers look like in an EU with 35 members?

In the first half of 2024, the Belgian Council Presidency is likely to put these issues firmly on the EU's political agenda. 22 years ago, the Belgian Presidency initiated the Laeken Declaration on the future of the European Union, adopted by the European Council on 15 December 2001. It launched the EU's constitutional process, which failed in the French and Dutch referenda of 2005 but eventually led to the Lisbon Treaty.

Broadening the discussion and engaging the public should start soon. The European Parliament elections from 6 to 9 June 2024 provide an opportunity to debate the Future of Europe and the future organisation of the EU. Political parties and leaders can present their ideas and plans to citizens and voters in all 27 member states, offering them a clear choice of what the EU should look like and how it should function. In this sense, the elections are an opportunity to engage with the public and extend the debate – an opportunity which should not be missed.



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