

The Frontiers of Europe:
A Transatlantic Problem?

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The Frontiers of Europe: A Transatlantic Problem?

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FRANCO FRATTINI

Foreword

The enlargement strategy and the frontiers of Europe are essential to the future of Europe. Over the years, the debate on the frontiers of Europe has gone hand in hand with the development of the European Union (EU) integration process. Enlargement remains an open issue that deeply affects the external role of the EU and its relations with other key international stakeholders, in particular the United States and Russia. In this context, I argue that the idea of geographic limits based on conventional criteria is not a suitable guide for the enlargement process. Instead, the EU should continue to offer the prospect of membership for those countries that share our principles of democracy, freedom, and the rule of law and are ready to assume the rights and obligations of membership, in accordance with the European treaties and the Copenhagen criteria.

It must be underscored that European integration was conceived to eliminate frontiers in all forms, ranging from physical, economic, and cultural frontiers to internal and external political ones. The European project thrived by focusing its energies on the realization of a common market, which in turn led to the creation of the Schengen area. In so doing, the European integration process was able to (re)unite the “old continent” in the name of liberal democracy and democratic values, which form the basis of our cultural identity and of the transatlantic relationship. Today the European Union is called upon to eliminate new frontiers, either by pursuing a true economic union by better coordinating the fiscal policies of its member states or by organizing a cohesive and effective external action policy and taking the first steps toward a common European defense framework.

Despite errors in the timing and manner of its gestation, enlargement to include the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) has proven to be a success. Enlargement was essentially a great stabilization operation conducted by using the European Union's civil "soft power" to best effect. The transforming power of the European model—with its political, economic, and value-oriented components—proved worthy of imitation. Brussels acted as a "magnet" by attracting its external neighbors and then transforming and integrating them. As a result, the enlargement of the European Union has brought peace, stability, security, and economic prosperity. This result is something we must never forget.

But is the Union's enlargement strategy still relevant today? Is it still in Europe's interest to take the enlargement project forward? Have the economic crisis and the speculative attack on the euro made the enlargement policy more uncertain or more necessary? In the medium and long term, what are the risks inherent to enlargement fatigue?

There is no doubt that some EU member states are increasingly skeptical of more enlargement. Italy's position on this matter, however, is very clear. It believes that it is in the European Union's interest to efficiently and rapidly complete the work it has begun, particularly in the Western Balkans and Turkey, as well as in Iceland. Reykjavik's decision to apply for EU membership demonstrates once again the power of attraction of the European project, and I will next put forward some considerations concerning the Western Balkans and Turkey.

Enlargement to the Balkans: The Political Vision of Thessalonica as a Political and Moral Duty

First, we need to ensure constant progress for future European accession for all the Western Balkan countries because of the strategic relevance of this area not just for the EU but also for the United States. In recent years, the prospect of full Euro-Atlantic integration has deeply changed this region, offering a political solution to eradicate the historical roots of instability and to bring peace, democracy, and economic development. However, despite all the progress achieved, this is no time for complacency.

This region continues to face political challenges related to the completion of its democratic transition. At the same time, outstanding bilateral issues continue to hamper regional cooperation. Moreover, the economic crisis that began in 2008 has deeply affected the economies of the Western Balkans, especially with regard to employment and social conditions. These effects may jeopardize the efforts already undertaken to consolidate stability and increase

prosperity. Against this background, the EU accession process is the only way to ensure a sound recovery and prevent the risk of new social and economic strains at the EU's external borders, with negative repercussions for the Union's economy and society.

Fully aware of this, the Spanish EU presidency agreed to implement an Italian proposal and organized a high-level meeting in Sarajevo on June 2, 2010. This conference played a key role in renewing the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans and their membership prospects. It also further strengthened EU cooperation with the United States, which plays a strategic role in promoting the political and economic stabilization in the area, together with Russia and Turkey. However, it is now essential to envisage a concrete follow-up to that meeting. A more ambitious and proactive approach by the EU is required to keep the Western Balkan countries anchored to Europe, thus consolidating democracy and fostering the reconciliation process in the region.

At a time when international dynamics have led to the adoption of new strategic approaches in Asia, Africa, and the Persian Gulf, the enlargement process to the Western Balkans must remain a priority on the EU agenda in the years to come because of the region's strategic importance to European security and stability. It should be clear that the Union's ability to assume its full share of responsibility as a global player will be measured primarily by the success of its strategy toward that neighborhood. Our mission cannot be considered accomplished until all the Western Balkan countries have joined the European family, a family to which they naturally belong.

Alternatively, the EU member states must be ready to pay the costs of nonenlargement. What is at stake is the risk of undermining the credibility of the EU enlargement strategy as a whole, which would include losing political leverage over all the countries involved. Nonaccession of the Balkan countries risks jeopardizing their adoption of important reforms toward democratization and modernization. The lack of a concrete European perspective would, moreover, create a real danger of alienating local public opinion and of strengthening radical and nationalistic movements. It could also discourage a flexible and constructive approach to outstanding bilateral disputes and thus undermine any concrete possibility of overcoming the problems of the past once and for all.

In this light, the next steps to be taken are clear. We need to move forward on visa liberalization—a process that I launched in 2008 as vice president of the European Commission—for all the Balkan countries. Before the end of 2011 this measure must also encompass the citizens of Bosnia and Albania. Croatia is expected to join the EU in 2012. Accession talks with Macedonia should begin as soon as the dispute about its name finds a commonly agreed

solution. Negotiations should also begin with Montenegro, which was granted candidate country status in December 2010. This status should also be granted to Serbia and Albania. And all of this needs to be done without leaving Bosnia or Kosovo behind.

Is Europe Losing Turkey? Ankara's EU Membership as a Strategic Objective

Some believe that Turkey is moving away from Europe. If so, does Europe have any responsibility for this change? The current framework of Turkey's EU accession process is not encouraging. The talks are at a standstill, mainly because of the lack of progress in the difficult normalization of Turkey's relations with Cyprus. At the same time, recent examples from Ankara's foreign policy decisions, ranging from the crisis in its relations with Israel and its rapprochement with Iran, are cause for significant doubts and questions.

Recent events notwithstanding, it is essential to re-launch the accession negotiations with Ankara in order to ensure Turkey's full integration in the EU. Turkey has committed itself to the EU integration process and has achieved remarkable progress in recent years, progress that has been encouraged by the European perspective. Any obstacles placed on Ankara's path toward Europe would compromise Turkey's adoption of important reforms and impact its democratization and modernization processes. They would also create a real danger of alienating Turkish society from the West and of strengthening radical and xenophobic movements, with negative repercussions not only for European security but for the international community as well.

The EU must not give Turkey any reasons or excuses to turn its back on Europe. The EU should maintain its commitments to Turkey's government and society and continue its talks with Ankara in good faith, according to the negotiating framework. Even in complicated times, the European Union must have the courage to grasp the challenge to its identity posed by Turkey's accession. We must be aware that Turkey's entry into the EU could have the same symbolic force for relations between the West and Islam as the French-German reconciliation or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ankara's entry into the EU could be read as a sign of the compatibility between Islam, democracy, and human rights, and of the Union's ability to welcome different cultures without losing its own identity. Europe must not turn its back on this historic objective. The EU shares crucial strategic interests with Ankara, such as the stability of the southern Caucasus, the security of energy supplies, and the fight against terrorism.

There is no doubt that Turkey still has a long way to go before accession. It is equally clear that it will reach its destination only if it manages to respect the commitments and obligations it has signed up for. While the journey is difficult, its final destination cannot be opened up once again to question. Italy will do everything in its power not to “lose” Turkey, but rather to keep its “European outlook” open and avoid questioning Turkey’s fundamental ability to proceed to full integration. Future EU membership for Turkey would be the culmination of a long modernization process for the country and would have a decisive impact on the prospects for stability in the entire Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea region.

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty has made the European Union uniquely suited to take on its leadership responsibility. It strengthened the EU’s role as a global actor able to seize the opportunities and face the challenges of the present international scenario with its fast changing developments that require a timely and unified response (for example, the recent revolts in the Arab world). The enlargement process is one such opportunity, one that Europeans cannot afford to miss if they want to make the EU a leading actor on the global stage. The European integration of the Western Balkans and Turkey would extend the EU’s geopolitical weight, thus expanding its influence more directly to the east (the Caucasus and Central Asia) and to the south (the Mediterranean area). There will inevitably be challenges ahead, but we now have the means to tackle them—and win. An enlarged and stronger European Union will also be of key importance in giving new content to the transatlantic relationship.

Indeed, as I have written, with Carl Bildt, William Hague, and Alexander Stubb, the EU’s enlargement process and its transformation from a (mainly) Western organization into a “truly pan-European Union” has been one of its greatest successes.¹ It is a mutually beneficial process for both the EU member states and the acceding countries, and one that should not be precluded from continuing.

Note

1. C. Bildt, F. Frattini, W. Hague, and A. Stubb, “Europe, Look Outward Again,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 10, 2010.

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