EUROPEAN WIDER NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract:
Ever since its creation, in 1957, the European Union has been continuously extending, reaching its peak in 2016, when it had „engulfed" most of the Old Continent (28 countries). While the enlarged free-trade zones and the Arab Spring provided wide opportunities for EU to expand its Area of interest - the Wide Neighbourhood Policy (WNP), there are also considerable challenges which place a large question-mark on the future of the WNP and the future of EU itself. Some of the biggest challenges are: the increasingly-hostile Russia, the Brexit, the refugees' crisis, various EU reconfiguration formulas, etc.

Key words: union, crisis, economic, social, political

1.Introduction

On 25 March 1957, in Rome, six of Europe's most developed nations (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany) signed the Founding Treaty of the European Economic Community (EEC). The Treaty of Rome (officially named the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community), set the cornerstone for the creation of one of the most spectacular and complex economic, social and political endeavour the Old Continent ever envisaged, known nowadays as the European Union.

Ever since its dawn, the EEC has been constantly evolving and expanding, from a regional economic community to a continental geo-political entity with trans-continents ambitions.

A turning point in EU's evolution was represented by the Treaty of Lisbon (also known as the Reform Treaty), signed by the EU member states on 13 December 2007 and entered into force on 1 December 2009. The treaty brought major changes, to include the move from unanimity to qualified majority voting in at least 45 policy areas in the Council of Ministers, a more powerful European Parliament forming a bicameral legislature alongside the Council of Ministers, the creation of a long-term President of the European Council and *a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy* – the later being of relevance for the present paper. Furthermore, the Treaty of Lisbon brought yet another fundamental change to the TEU: member states received, for the first time, the explicit legal right to leave the Union (art. 50) and detailed the procedure to do so. [1]

On 01 May 2014, the fifth enlargement of the Union brought 10 new states into the EU - the largest expansion in its history.

In the eve of this enlargement, the Union expressed, in a *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament*, its determination "***to avoid drawing new dividing lines in Europe*** and to **promote stability and prosperity within and beyond the new borders** of the Union [2]. The foundation for the EU Wider

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Neighbourhood policy was thus laid. The same document called for strenghtening relations with Russia, and for enhanced relations with Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and the Southern Mediterranean countries to be based on a long term approach, promoting ***reform, sustainable development and trade***. The perspectives of the Western Balkans countries for accession to the EU were also stated in the *Communication*.

2.European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

2.1.   The European External Action Service (EEAS)

In 2010, following the Treaty of Lisbon, the EU Directorate-General for the External Relations (DG RELEX), established in 1958, was ***merged into the EEAS***. Though it was initially led by the Catherine Ashton (UK), the incumbent High Representative, Ms. Federica Mogherini is the image generally assimilated with EEAS.

The EEAS constitutes the EU's **diplomatic service**. It helps the EU's foreign affairs chief – the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – carry out the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy [3].

Fig.1 Ms. Federica Mogherini (ITA) High Representative of the
European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, since
2014 [3]

The EEAS is in charge of the EU's response to crises, is independent from other EU institutions, has its own intelligence capabilities and an independent budget. However, the EEAS / the High Representative ***can only propose and implement policy***; making EU policies is a role reserved to the Foreign Affairs Council which the High Representative chairs. [4].

Besides the economic component and despite the lack of an European Armed Force or any permanent military establishment, EU has also been involved in a large array of military and civilian missions and operations: EUFOR/Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Border Assistance missions (EUBAM) in Libya, Moldova and Ukraine; Capacity Building missions (EUCAP) in Niger, Mali, Somalia, training missions (EUTM) in Mali, Central African Republic, Somalia; Rule of Law enforcement mission (EULEX) in Kosovo, advisory missions (EUAM) Ukraine, Naval Interdiction and antipiracy missions –Naval Force ATALANTA (EU NAVFOR); Elections Observation Missions (EUEOMS) in Zambia, Gabon, Ghana, Jordan, Gambia an Timor Leste, to list just a few. [3]

2.2.   European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

The **ENP** is one of the main EU foreign relations instruments, which seeks to tighten the relationships between EU and its easter and souther neighbours. These

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countries, of whom the majority are developing countries, either aim to become a member state of the Union, or to obtain a preferential status (acces to as many EU-sponsored programs, partnerships and aid instruments as posible).

The EU concept of Wider Europe and its European Neighbourhood Policy was initially defined/presented in the European Commission communication to the European Council and European Parliament on 11 March 2003: (Neighbourhood - A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours). The ENP initial *aims* were:

1. too increase the political, geographic and economic weight of the EU on the European continent;

2. to change the shape of the EU's political and economic relations with other parts of the world; and

3. to give a new impulse to the effort of drawing closer to approximately 400 million inhabitants of countries on the EU's external land and sea borders. [2]

A map of the EU Wider Neighbourhood layout is presented below (fig. 2)

Fig.2 EU Wider Neighbourhood Layout [5]

In addition to the existing and potential EU candidates at the time (2003), the European Neighbourhood also included Russia (having a special partner status), former soviet republics (west of Russia), the Middle East countries, and the countries of North Africa (+Mauritania).

The ENP was reviewed in 2011, following the 'Arab Spring' uprisings and the subsequent changes and significant developments in the "Neighbourhood".

The 2011-revised ENP (titled: "A new response to a changing Neighbourhood"), was backed by more than €1.2 billion in new funding, bringing the total amount of EU financial commitment to its neighbours to almost €7 billion. Even though the initial aim of the ENP did not change, it new emphasis is on two principles:

1. The implementation of a differentiated approach to EU Neighbours, to respect their different aspirations and to better answer EU interests;

2. An increased ownership by partner countries and member states.[5]

Basically, the EU core values - *democracy*, *human rights* and the *rule of law* and *economic openness* remained unchanged, but there is new focus (a political driven one) – to obtain *stability* in order to foster development. The driving principle is *'more funds for more reform'* – meaning that additional funds were made available for the EU neighbours/partners, but with increased mutual accountability.[7]

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In March 2015, the European Commission launched a review of the principles on which ENP is based, as well as its scope and how its instruments should be used. The consultation followed 4 priorities: differentiation; focus; flexibility; ownership and visibility. The consultations resulted in a new Joint Communication setting out the main lines of a reviewed ENP, published on 18 November 2015 (titled "Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy").

The new ENP chalanges are: the rising extremism and terrorism, human rights violations, the Conflict in Sirya, the refugees tide, cybersecurity, and so on. ***Stabilization***, in order to produce security is the new desiderate. Therefore, the new avenues of approach are developed, focused on the security sector reform, conflict prevention, counter-terrorism and anti-radicalisation policies, compliance with international human rights law, refugees crisis solutions, etc. [8]

2.3.   Wider Europe
The concept of a Wider Europe, derived from the ENP, is an abstract and flexible, structure, made up of 53 countries:

-EU member state (28 – soon to be 27, after the Brexit completion);

-EU candidate countries (5): Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Turkey;

-EU potential candidate countries (2): Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (not recognized as a state by all the member states);

-Russia;

-the Eastern Partnership countries (6): Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine;

-MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries (11): Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestinian National Authority, Syria, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania.

EU has an area of approx. 4,5 mil. skm, and an estimate of half a billion (mainly aged or aging) population. By comparison, the Wider Europe had a total population of approximately 1 billion people (a majority-young population), a 7 times bigger area, enormous resources and a substantial combined GDP. Therefore, Europe's Neighborhood will play a key role in the Union's future development.

A diagram of the EU member states and partners in presented below (fig. 3)

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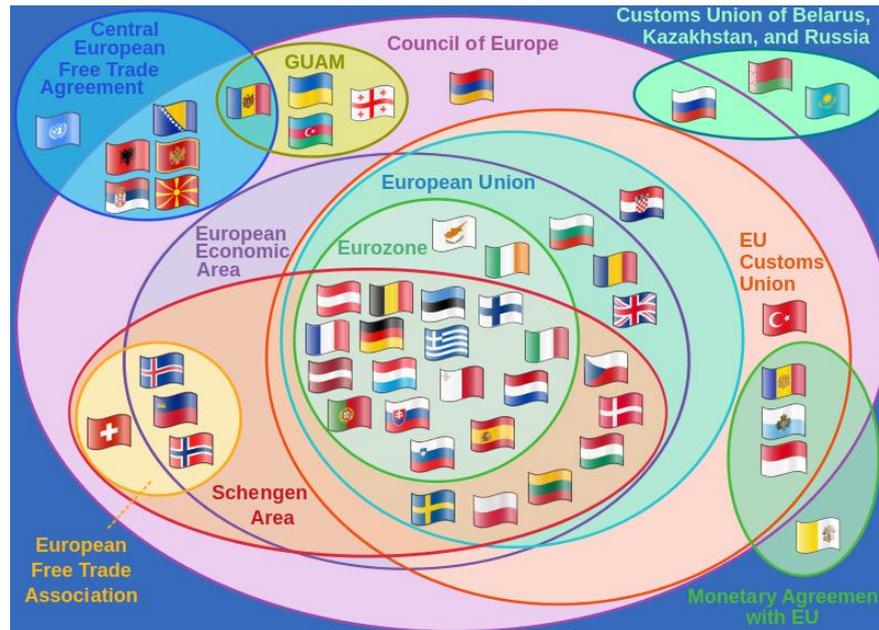
Fig.3 Diagram of membership of European Countries in European Entities [5]

2.3.1. Accession candidate countries

As presented in the previous chapter, in terms of accession to the EU, we have 2 categories of states:

- *candidate* countries: Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, FYROM and Turkey;
- *potential candidate* countries : Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo;

Apart from the countries/categories above, there are a few other situations worth mentioning:

- *frozen application countries*: Norway, Switzerland and Iceland (the population voted against joining the EU, despite the initial application/bid);
- "withdrawing" countries: United Kingdom being the first and only member state to initiate the procedure for exiting the Union. Theoretically, it is still a member of the Union;

However, as illustrated in the EU membership diagram (fig. 3), all the European countries which have frozen their application, have joined different treaties/partnerships/other association forms with EU (Schengen Area, European Free Trade Association; European Economic Area), making them, de facto, EU family members.

The candidate countries' situation is relatively clear. They have all applied for full EU membership and have already been confirmed as candidates, as follows: Albania (applied in 2009 / confirmed in 2014); FYROM (applied in 2004 / confirmed in 2005); Montenegro (applied in 2008 / confirmed in 2010 / started negotiations in 2012); Serbia (applied in 2009 / confirmed in 2012). They still have a long road ahead, but their path is clear.

Regarding *the potential candidates*- Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina- they have also been promised the prospect of joining the EU, when they will be ready. They have a long list of criteria to fulfill before even considering submitting their bid. Bosnia's deep ethnic divisions, the unstable political climate, generalized corruption and organized crime prevents any realistic bid for joining the EU. Also, Kosovo's independence is not recognized by several EU countries (including Romania). But, the EU considers them both as potential candidates for membership. [9]

The only *exception* in terms of EU accession remains Turkey.

2.3.2. Turkey - the odd candidate

A particular case among the EU accession candidates is Turkey. It has been an associate member of EEC ever since 1963 and made a strong **bid to adher in 1987** (before the actual creation of the modern days EU). Furthermore, Turkey is one of the first countries to become a member of the Council of Europe (in 1949), and was also a founding member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1973. [10]

Turkey has a sizeable and relatively well developed economy and the biggest army in Europe (and the second in NATO, after USA). It has also been part or funding member of numerous other EU organizations (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD, the Custom Union, the former West European Union, etc.).

Despite all these arguments, Turkey's accession bid is **weaker than ever**. Altough Turkey submited its bid to join the EU in 1987, accession talks began on 3 October 2005 (in the same time with Croatia, who joine the Union in 2013). But the list of strutural reforms Turkey should implement is long. Allegedly, it could complete negotiations in 10-15 years, but progress has been very slow, as the EU is divided over whether Turkey should join at all
Turkey would be the first Muslim country to join the Union or not.[9]

Furthermore, on 24 November 2016 the European Parliament voted to suspend accession negotiations with Turkey over human rights and rule of law concerns. President Recep Tayyp Erdogan's path toward an autocratic rule makes progress on EU accession even less probable.

There have been allegations (even acuzations of discrimination against muslims), since Turkey would have been the first muslim country ever to join the EU. However, at the time of its initial accession bid, Turkey was a secular state – a significant exception in the Islam countries group. Also, the appearance on Europe's map of a new muslim entitiy/state – Kosovo and the significant increase, in recent years, of the muslim minoritis in many Western Europe countries, will foerce the EU to tackle this issue sooner or later, thus helping Turkey joining bid.

3. Regional Partnerships and Initiatives

Following its goal to efficiently expand the cooperation with the Neighbourhood countries, the Union has developed a large array of political and economical instruments – partnerships, agreements, regional initiatives, unions, etc. Two of the most significant one (in terms on number of members and/or accession perspectives) are the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM).

3.1. The Eastern Partnership

Initiated by Poland and Sweden and inaugurated on 7 May 2009, in Prague, the Eastern Partnership is a EU initiative aimed to strengthen the Union's relations with 6 former soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. It is intended to provide a venue for discussions of trade, economics, travel agreements and other issues between the EU and its former Soviet Union neighbours. [3]

Further on, I chose two examples – Georgia and Ukraine in order to illustrate the intricate relations of the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries.

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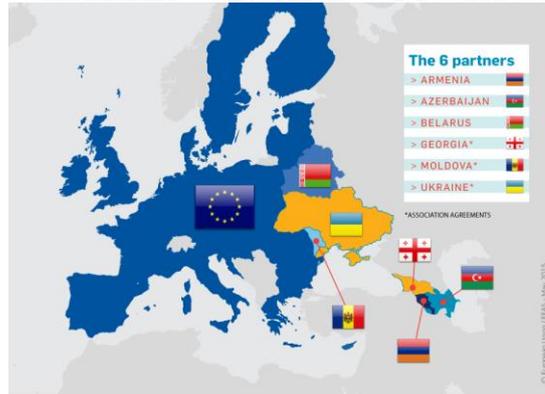
Fig.4 EU Eastern Partnership [11]

3.1.1. Georgia – 110% commitment

Georgia took a pro-western stance since 2003. However, it is the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 that clearly set Georgia on the adhering path (to both EU and NATO).

Among the 6 nations forming the Eastern Partnership, Georgia is, by far, the most committed to the European path. In 2015, the EU has become Georgia's main trading partner, accounting for more than a quarter of the country's total trade turnover (with Russia and former Soviet Union countries still accounting for more than a fifth) and is also the country's main provider of aid/financial assistance (more than €100 million a year).
Here are a few landmarks in the calendar of Georgia's road to a potential EU accession:
 -2014 – entered the EU's Free Trade Area;
 -July 2016– signed the EU Association Agreement;
 -March 2017 – was granted visa-free travel of its citizens to the Schengen Area.

Fig.5 Destroyed Georgian tank in Tskhinvali [11]

Georgia's commitment to the EU path is justified by the country's precarious security and economic situation. With the wounds of the 2008 war against Russia and Russian-backed separatist still open, Georgia seeks the political association and economic integration with the EU as a matter *of national survival*.

3.1.2. Ukraine-the illogical choice

In 2013, Ukraine's economy was struggling, severely affected by a serie of factors to include: the efects of the global economic crisis, lack of reforms and modernization, underfinancing, etc. Reaching out for aid/support, the Ukrainian leaders faced a difficult choice: turn West (sign a political association and free trade agreement with the EU) or remain orientated toward East (maintaining it partnership/close ties with Russia).

A general, simplified overview of the situation is presented in the table below:

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UKRAINE (expectations/needs)	EU	RUSSIA
	(pledges)	
€20 billion in loans and aid	approx. €600 mil. in loans	approx. €15 billion in loans and aid
"perks"	--	cheap gas
--	major changes to laws and regulations	no laws changes
free trade agreement	free trade agreement	free trade agreement
security& territorial integrity warranties	security& territorial integrity warranties	security warranties

President Viktor Yanukovych chose to turn his back to the West and tighten the relations with Russia, thus triggering what is known as the Ukrainian Revolution or the Euromaidan (18-23 February 2014). With the price of approximately 150 lives (both protesters and law enforcers), Ukraine won its right to democracy, freedom and hopefully, a better future. However, in a matter of months, Ukraine lost Crimea, Sevastopol and the Donbas region (Lughansk and Donetsk provinces).

Now, it's a good time to go back to the table above and see what the options were, back in 2014. It looks like Ukraine made a completely illogical choice, with disastrous consequences. In its quest for an uncertain EU accession bid, Ukraine might have *lost much more than it might ever gain* by becoming a EU member state.

Fig.5 Protesters fighting government forces on the Kiev Maidan [12]

3.2. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)

In the previous chapter we presented the EU Neighborhood Policy in the Est. Switching Southward, the EU first comprehensive policy for the region was the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (or Barcelona Process), created in 1995; it provided a wide framework of political, economic and social relations between member states of the EU and countries of the Southern Mediterranean. [14]

In July 2008, during the Paris Summit for the Mediterranean, EU made a bid to reinforce the cooperation in the Mediteranean area thus creating the UfM – de facto, a succesor of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

The UfM is an intergovernmental organization of 43 countries from Europe and the Mediterranean Basin: the 28 EU member states (soon to be 27) and 15 Mediterranean partner countries from North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Europe. [13]. UfM partner countries are: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Israel, Jordan,

Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, State of Palestine, Syria (currently suspended from the Union), Tunisia and Turkey. Also, Libya has the status of observer, with a real perspective of joinig UfM in the near future.

UfM has the aim of promoting stability and prosperity throughout the Mediterranean region. It is a forum for discussing regional strategic issues, based on the principles of shared ownership, shared decision-making and shared responsibility between the two shores of the Mediterranean. Its main goal is to increase both North-South and South-South integration in the Mediterranean region, in order to support the countries' socio-economic development and ensure stability in the region [14].

UfM actions are guided by three atpriorities: ***regional human development***, ***regional integration*** and ***regional stability***. It identifies and supports a large array of regional projects and initiatives of different sizes, to which it gives its label, following a consensual decision among the forty-three countries.[14]

4.Opportunities and Challenges

Ever since its creation, the Union permanently evolved, developed and expanded. The fall of the iron curtain and the Soviet Union dissolution, in 1991, provided the EU an exceptional occasion to expand, succeeding in doubling its size and number of members in less than two decades.

With a powerful and competitive economy backing its actions, the EU began to implement a more consistent external policy, seeking to expand its influence in the adjacent areas. The EU Wider Neighbourhood Policy, established in 2003, identified the means and directions for the EU expansion (not a de facto expansion, but actually a more active implication and larger economic footprint in the Unions' adjacent areas).

The main EU ***expansion opportunity*** was provided by the sudden changes of the political regimes in North Africa and the Middle East. The major socio-political phenomenon known as the ***Arab Spring*** began in December 2010, in Tunisia, but the revolutionary wave spread fast throughout region. A large array of both violent and non-violent demonstrations, protests, riots, coups and even civil wars raged through the region, affecting mainly Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, but echoing in most of the countries in North Africa and the Middle East.[15]

The switch from endemic dictatorships to emergent democracy, made the countries in the region much more appealing for EU, in term of enhanced social, political and economical cooperation. However, political stability and democracy are prerequisites for successfully implementing the EU economic and financial instruments of development, and the North Africa and the Middle East countries are not known for their democratic stance. Although there are visible changes in the political system in the region, the countries benefiting from the Arab Spring changes appear to prefer a home-grown nation-tailored democracy versus an import democracy coming from the EU.

Also, the strong pro-EU stance taken by several former soviet republics also offered EU the opportunity to expand its influence in the Black Sea region and to prospect new potential accession candidates (Georgia, Moldavia, Ukraine).

The ***main challenges EU*** is facing in its quest to enhance cooperation with the Neighbourhood Partners are: the refugees crisis (for which EU members failed to adopt an efficient and mutually agreed upon solution a solution); the increasingly strong and aggressive Russian stance (which places the EU Eastern Partnership members in a very sensitive and precarious security situation); the Syrian conflict (were the EU failed to produce and implement any solution to the raging civil war); the Brexit (which, most probably, the EU will treat to the full extent of harshness allowed in politics and diplomacy, in order to deter any future "defections" intentions of member states). Finding

efficient, long term solutions to these challenges is essential for the success of the ENP implementation and even for the future of the Union itself.

4.1. The "Discriminatory" Union

A simple look at the EU member states diagram, presented in fig. 3, will indicate that 10 out of the Union's 28 states are not in the Eurozone (only a couple, by their own choice). Also 6 member countries are not included in the Schengen Area, even though, 4 non-EU member states are part of it. These are only a few examples aimed to present the differences between EU member states.

Obviously, not all member-states are "equal". In fact, one could hardly imagine a biggest disparity in terms of population, area, economic development, military strength, etc., than the one envisaged by EU. However, all members should be equal before the Union, before its laws and regulations, both in rights and obligations.

The major economic and socio-political gaps between member states triggered a long-lasting and spirits-igniting debate regarding the future configuration of the Union.

What's in a name? Be it a ***two-speed Europe*** or a ***Multi-speed Europe***, a ***"variable geometry Europe"*** or a ***"Concentric Circles Europe"***, it makes no difference. The fundamental issue remains the same: different states are integrating in the Union at different levels and pace, depending on the political situation in each individual country.

Unfortunately, a multi-speed Europe is not just a concept, is a fact (is the current reality) and constitutes a major challenge for the EU's future development/expansion or even for its integrity. More Exits might follow, as members' discontent grows due to the perspective of a ***"lesser member"*** status. Ultimately, it could lead to a ***"narrower Union"*** and a Wider Neighbourhood which will include more "former member states".

5. Conclusion

The EEAS is the lead department in charge of implementing the ENP. It is in the Union best interest to expand its area on influence as far as possible and way beyond the adjacent regions. But it appears that the Neighborhood has already got as wide as it can be. Even though, from economical point of view, EU has tremendous power and resources which it can project much further beyond its geographical borders, I consider that the Union lacks the military power and the political influence to expand any further.

The EU Wider Neighborhood Policy achieved its goals, but also reached its limits. The main priority for the Union should be to consolidate the present status rather than to look further away it current borders and areas on influence.

Certainly, there will be other enlargements of the EU, to include at list some of the current accession candidates (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, FYROM). The accession of Turkey, Kosovo and Bosnia are also possible, even though not very probable in the near future. Expanding Eastward, to incorporate some of Eastern Partnership members (Moldavia, Ukraine, Georgia) is also an option. Therefore, the main question arising is where does the EU draw the line in terms of defining its outer borders? Is the EU capable or interested in evolving into a ***Wider European Union***, to include its current partners from the wide neighbourhood? Probably, not.

We should also keep in mind that skepticism is a very strong feature of the human nature. For some, EU might appear as a strict and intrusive organization. Too many rules; too many constrains; too little flexibility; way too many control mechanism, and so on. What if EU is not the better deal? The truth is that everybody is watching closely the Brexit. The next 2 years are essential for the future of the Union. Should UK be better off, than other member states might follow their example. Frexit, Grexit and other Exits might follow. Ultimately, instead of a ***Wider European Union*** we might end up with a ***Narrower***

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European Union and a Wider Neighbourhood which will include more "former member states".

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