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Does Hungary still belong in the European Union?

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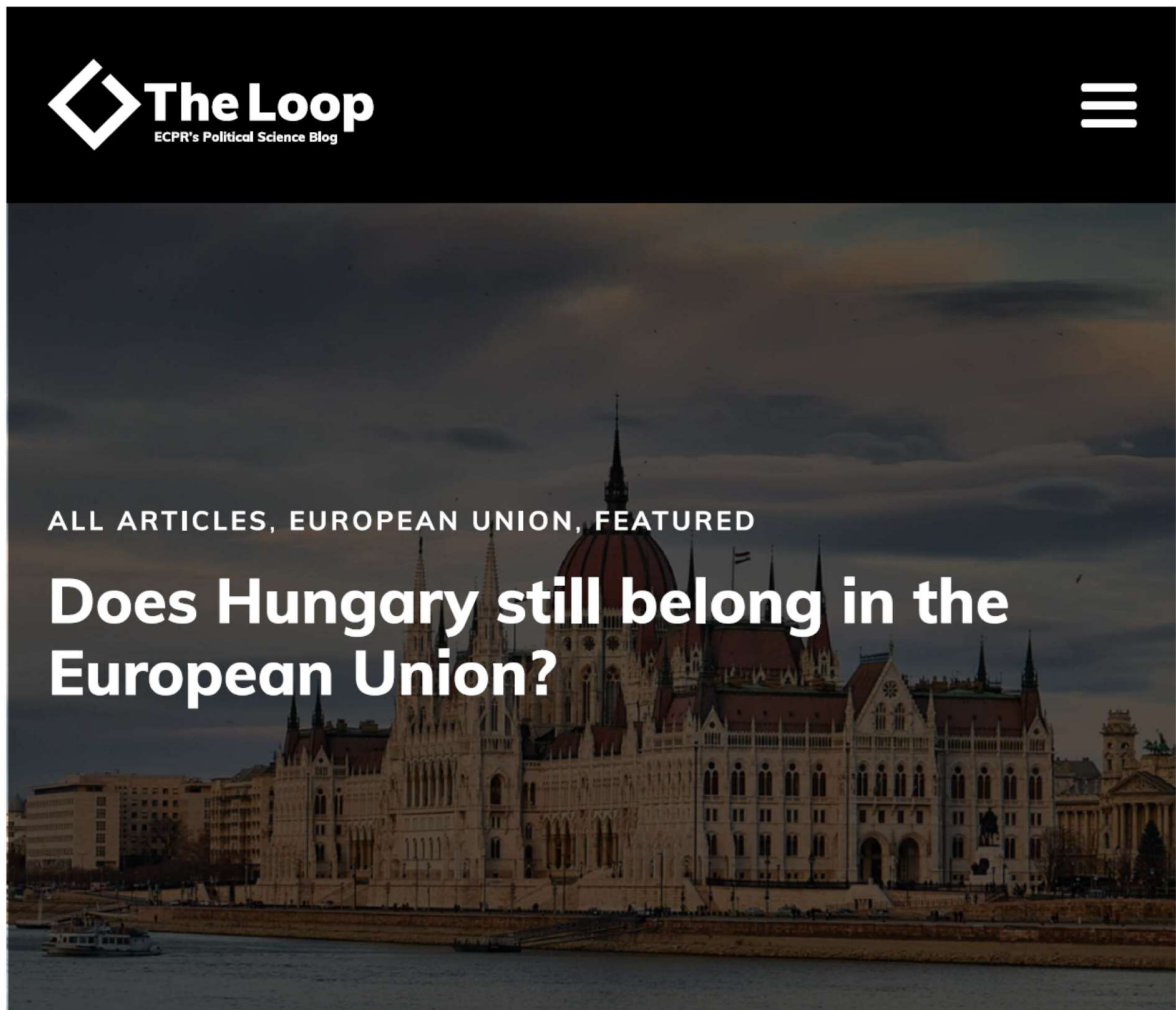
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Sebastian Contin Trillo-Figueroa and **James F. Downes** argue that the EU faces a dilemma: should it pursue continued enlargement, or contract its membership by removing troublesome member state Hungary? Reaching a decision involves a complex trade-off between the need to increase EU influence and to maintain a unified, cohesive membership

EU enlargement or contraction?

In recent years, the EU has faced challenges related to its core principles, including rule of law disputes and **democratic backsliding**. **Some member states** have acted in clear violation of the EU's **Copenhagen criteria**. Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, member state Hungary has even undermined EU efforts to support Ukraine against Russia's military aggression.

Hungary's political manoeuvres have repeatedly stalled critical decisions and delayed financial support, undermining the EU's ability to act decisively. These interruptions have hampered the EU's ability to maintain unity in the face of external crises, which is exacerbating internal fractures yet further.

In response to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the EU has **prioritised enlargement** into the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. However, this process is lengthy and complex for candidate countries and for EU institutions. **Serbia's protracted EU application**, ongoing since 2009, shows how the merit-based process demands substantial reforms.

We believe that in the short term, the EU should prioritise addressing its internal problems over enlargement of the bloc. Once these challenges are resolved, the EU can improve its institutional framework and enhance its capacity for effective expansion.

Hungary's two decades of EU disillusionment

Hungary's accession to the EU in 2004 was an important milestone for EU enlargement. It brought with it generous financial benefits that aimed to improve infrastructure, governance, and economic stability. Two decades later, however, the anticipated returns have not materialised. Hungary's policies under Orbán increasingly **clash with EU** standards, undermining the democratic progress expected from the country's integration.

Hungary's policies under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán increasingly clash with EU standards, undermining the democratic progress expected from its integration

Orbán's recent national populist campaign slogan for the 2024 European elections – **Occupy Brussels! No migration, no gender, no war!** – offers further evidence of his provocative stance. Hungary assumed the rotating EU Council Presidency in July 2024 under the confrontational motto **Make Europe Great Again**, an obvious reference to Orbán's admiration for former US President Donald Trump.

Hungarian officials loyal to Orbán have clashed with key EU institutions. The country has relaxed **visa restrictions** to admit Russian and Belarusian citizens, who could subsequently travel to other EU countries under the freedom of movement principle.

Addressing the elephant in the room

We propose the EU abandons its continued enlargement efforts and instead adopts a strategy of contraction. More specifically, it should reduce membership from 27 to 26 by managing the phased exit of member state Hungary.

Hungary's Council of the EU Presidency concludes on 31 December. Thereafter, the EU should invoke **Article 7** of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) to address Hungary's violations of core EU values and the undermining of unity. This article allows for the imposition of sanctions, including suspending Hungary's voting rights in the Council in cases of a 'clear risk of a serious breach' of EU values.

We propose the EU adopts a strategy of contraction, and manages Hungary's phased exit

The Hungarian Presidency appears to have overstepped its designated powers in the EU framework. External representation lies under the President of the European Council and the EU Commission (**Articles 15(6)** and **27(2)** TEU). In addition, Hungary **may have violated principles** of political solidarity and sincere cooperation (**Articles 24(3)** and **4(3)** TEU) by acting against the Union's interests.

No EU treaty provides a direct mechanism for expulsion. The Council should invite Hungary to initiate the withdrawal process under **Article 50 TEU**. If Hungary does not proceed with this, expulsion would require a fundamental treaty amendment or a new legal framework. In the absence of such provisions, The Court of Justice of the European Union should offer interpretative guidance on this matter.

The EU should seek to suspend financial transfers to Hungary immediately as economic leverage to enforce compliance with EU standards. Despite persistent government propaganda, Hungary continues to receive substantial EU funds. These funds support projects that would otherwise remain mere **fantasies**.

Why the EU might need to downsize before enlarging

Removing Hungary from the EU would have profound implications for the bloc's future. Firstly, without Hungary's disruptions, the EU could focus on strategy, improving cohesion and efficiency. This shift would facilitate the removal of the current **rule which requires the Council to vote unanimously** on matters the member states consider sensitive. By streamlining decision-making – particularly in foreign policy – the EU would become a more decisive geopolitical actor.

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Secondly, implementing an exit mechanism would streamline future EU enlargement processes. A clear withdrawal process would enable the EU to adjust accession criteria more flexibly – and that might speed up integration. This approach would reduce prolonged negotiations and the inevitable delays that accompany enlargement, allowing for efficient expansion while upholding core EU values.

Thirdly, implementing such a process would send a strong message to other countries contemplating anti-EU actions. It would underscore the importance of upholding EU values and norms, deterring states from following a similar path to Hungary. The EU is not a cash dispenser; membership requires adherence to all its principles.

Finally, the removal of Hungary as an EU member state would reduce external interference. Hungary's exit from the single market would likely weaken Russia's and China's efforts to exploit divisions within the EU, and this would render the Union more resilient against external pressures. The EU still holds the power to forge its own destiny.

This article presents the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the ECPR or the Editors of *The Loop*.



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