

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S 'MACHIAVELLIAN MOMENT' ENLARGEMENT AND THE RISK OF OVERSTRETCH¹

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INTRODUCTION

'Expansion, when based on a weak republic, simply means ruin.'² These are the words of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), the Florentine civil servant, diplomat and political thinker. Machiavelli, who studied expanding republics in his *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, learned from history that extending a polity's territory out of perceived 'necessity', but without the underlying capacity and preparation, was a recipe for overstretch. It is a scenario for a 'Machiavellian moment', a term coined by the historian of political thought John Pocock to denote a period in which a polity 'is involved in historical tensions or contradictions which it either generates or encounters', and which oblige it to confront 'its own temporal finitude', while attempting to 'remain morally and politically stable'.³

The Machiavellian analysis of expanding commonwealths provides a pertinent angle to reassess the European Union (EU)'s current drive for enlargement. Putting widening in the context of Machiavelli's complex dialectic of international power politics, the next section of this article examines how the accession of Ukraine and Moldova somewhat unexpectedly became a 'geopolitical imperative' for the EU. For Machiavelli, however, 'one should never expand unless one can afford it, that is, unless one can rely on an adequate domestic institutional arrangement and appropriate military means'.⁴ The subsequent sections of this article show that the EU is insufficiently prepared

ABSTRACT

In the *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, Machiavelli pioneered the study of expanding commonwealths and their sustainability. He showed that expansion by 'necessity' resulted in ruin for a polity whose decision-making capacity and defence posture were not up to the challenge. Badly prepared expansion was poised to bring the commonwealth into a life-threatening crisis – a 'Machiavellian moment'. Machiavelli's framework of analysis provides most pertinent insights into the current predicament of the European Union and its enlargement drive.

Keywords: European Union, enlargement, Machiavelli, overstretch.

RESUMO

**O «MOMENTO
MAQUIAVÉLICO» DA UNIÃO
EUROPEIA: ALARGAMENTO
E RISCO DE OVERSTRETCH**

Nos *Discursos sobre a Primeira Década* de Tito Lívio, Maquiavel foi pioneiro no estudo da expansão das comunidades e sua sustentabilidade. Mostrou que a expansão por «necessidade» resultou na ruína de uma organização cuja capacidade de decisão e



postura de defesa não estavam à altura do desafio. A expansão mal preparada conduzia a comunidade a uma crise com risco de vida – um «momento maquiavélico». O quadro de análise de Maquiavel fornece informações muito pertinentes sobre a situação atual da União Europeia e o seu impulso de alargamento.

Palavras-chave: União Europeia, alargamento, Maquiavel, *overstretch*.

with respect to both conditions. Regarding the possible accession of Ukraine, and the EU's deficient defence posture, the advent of the second Trump administration is an aggravating factor. As a result, the EU's current drive for enlargement is effectively turning into a 'Machiavellian moment'. As French President Emmanuel Macron explained: 'We must be clear on the fact that our Europe, today, is mortal. It can die. It can die, and that depends entirely on our choices'.⁵

Using a framework of analysis developed about five hundred years ago comes with certain limitations. In short, 'Machiavelli lived in the Renaissance, and the Renaissance lived in Machiavelli'.⁶ Still, there is no doubt that his works 'still retain an uncanny level of perceptive political observations valid even in our modern day', especially in a Europe that is once again undergoing the effects of predatory power politics.⁷ The broad historical basis of his analysis contributes to its remaining relevance. The *Discourses* were largely derived from an in-depth reading of Rome's republican institutions and practices, with Titus Livius and Cicero as the main sources. Machiavelli contrasted his findings on the Roman republic with the struggles of polities such as Athens, Sparta, Venice, the Etruscan league, the Swiss confederation, the Netherlands, France, and the Habsburg Empire as well as his own experience in Florence. When formulating conclusions on upholding the security and institutions of the *res publica* (republic or commonwealth) or *stato* (state), Machiavelli thus drew on a great variety of political entities over different periods in history, from city-states to large composite entities.⁸ This invites us to further extrapolate his key questions and observations to more recent historical periods and political structures, as will be done in the present article.⁹

Since Machiavelli has a rather sinister reputation as counsellor to absolute rulers on how to take and maintain power, it is useful to signal that the present article contains few references to the *The Prince*, which is responsible for the Florentine's infamy. In the *Discourses*, on which this analysis is based, Machiavelli's central concern was the survival of the republic in *libertà* (independence), as opposed to *servitù* (dependence).¹⁰ To say of a political entity that 'it possesses its liberty is equivalent to saying that it holds itself independent of any authority save that of the community itself'.¹¹ This is not unlike the EU's current preoccupation with 'building our European sovereignty, reducing our dependencies', and 'achieving strategic autonomy'.¹² Furthermore, the *Discourses* focused on the territorially extended polity and the ways and means of making its expansion successful. In the words of Alissa Ardito, 'Machiavelli deserves to be recognized as the first modern political theorist to envision the possibility of a republic with a large population extending over a wide territory'.¹³

ENLARGEMENT AND THE COMPLEX DIALECTIC OF POWER POLITICS

For Machiavelli, a polity's choice for expansion will almost automatically trigger a reaction from the other major players in the neighbourhood who might feel threatened or fear subjugation.¹⁴ Initially, the Florentine diplomat therefore acknowledged the attractiveness of creating a limited commonwealth that would avoid making it appear menacing to the neighbours. If a polity is 'content with its own territory, and it becomes clear by experience that it has no [territorial] ambitions', the neighbours cannot feel imperiled, 'especially if by its constitution or by its laws expansion is prohibited'.¹⁵ Such a polity might then be able to steer clear of clashes with outside powers, at least for some time. Machiavelli's historical perspective, however, soon made him realise that creating a situation of splendid isolation was an illusion: 'It is impossible for a state to remain for ever in the peaceful enjoyment of its liberties and its narrow confines; for, though it may not molest other states, it will be molested by them', and from being thus molested will spring the desire and necessity of expansion to control the neighbourhood.¹⁶ Thus, to be independent means having the ability to control the neighbourhood, and that, in turn, implies having the ability to expand.¹⁷ Especially 'if one's rivals are growing more powerful – and therefore more threatening – in territorial or other terms, one may well be forced to engage in expansion in order to counterbalance their growth' and control the external milieu.¹⁸ In a world reigned by brutal power politics, Machiavelli saw fear and a desperation to (re)gain a sense of mastery over the frontier as a 'fundamental moving force' behind expansion.¹⁹

Looked at from the EU's perspective, staying within its original confines has never been the ideal. EU history is a history of enlargement.²⁰ The founding European Community treaties allowed 'any European State' to apply for membership and called 'upon the other peoples of Europe who share their ideal to join in their efforts'.²¹ In the aftermath of the Cold War, the 1992 Lisbon European Council established that '[t]he principle of a Union open to European States that aspire to full participation and who fulfil the conditions for membership is a fundamental element of the European construction'.²²

THE LIMITS OF 'ONE EUROPE' WERE NEVER SET.
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Countries that avoided taking sides during the Cold War, such as Austria, Finland and Sweden, as well as former members of the Warsaw Pact were welcomed under the leitmotif of creating 'One Europe' and 'avoid[ing] new dividing lines'.²³ The limits

of 'One Europe' were never set. For the European Commission, the 'term "European" combines geographical, historical and cultural elements [that] cannot be condensed into a simple timeless formula and is subject to review by each succeeding generation'.²⁴ It therefore concluded 'that it is neither possible nor opportune to establish now the frontiers of the European Union, whose contours will be shaped over many years

to come'.²⁵ In other words, the EU answered the question 'what is Europe?' by 'rejecting a geographical interpretation'.²⁶

Once a polity shows openness to further expansion without setting clear limits, Machiavelli teaches us this will automatically have its effects on the external milieu and the behaviour of the neighbours.²⁷ That behaviour might, in turn, be the trigger that transforms the potential of enlargement into actual practice. Machiavelli's intertwined and dialectic perspective on a commonwealth's expansion potential and expansion reality (a) as a consequence of geo-political movements in the neighbourhood and (b) as a trigger of such geo-political shifts, makes it very difficult to predict the outcome of such a dynamic. Each polity will plan and perform actions to dominate the situation and protect itself, 'but at the same moment action creates new contingencies which must be understood and dominated in their turn'.²⁸

The EU's acceptance of the applications for membership by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in 2022–23 can be interpreted as an example of this complex dialectic struggle.²⁹ Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the accession route was in principle closed to the Eastern Partnership countries.³⁰ What Commission President Romano Prodi had in mind when proposing the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2002 was to surround the EU by a 'ring of friends', who could be offered 'everything but the institutions', i.e. a path towards participation in the internal market and the EU programmes, but without a voice in EU decision-making.³¹ While the ENP thus fell 'short of providing recipients of EU action with a membership perspective', this door was never formally shut.³² In the same vein, the Association Agreements between the EU and Georgia (signed in 2013), Moldova (signed in 2013) and Ukraine (signed in 2014) did not include a promise of EU accession. Their focus was on legislative alignment along the EU model, together with the creation of deep and comprehensive free trade areas. Ironically, Moscow's failed attempt to stop the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which it viewed as an incursion into its sphere of vital interests, and the successful Euromaidan uprising of 2013–14, strengthened Ukraine's expectation that EU accession was on the horizon.³³ But it was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that effectively opened the EU's doors for the Eastern Partnership countries. In the words of Josep Borrell, then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 'the war in Ukraine has had a collateral effect that is to speed up the enlargement process' as it reinforced the EU's determination to limit Russia's influence, also in the Western Balkans.³⁴ For Machiavelli, such a turnaround of strategies and actions would not come as a surprise, for international politics is constantly subject of 'the winds of fortune and changes in the situation'.³⁵

PREPARING FOR THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Machiavelli saw *fortuna* (whether good or bad) as providing an opportunity to be exploited by *virtù* (the quality of mind and courageous action for the benefit of the commonwealth).³⁶

The best way of dealing with fortune was to prepare for it. One of the most famous paragraphs of *The Prince* underscores this point:

‘I compare fortune to one of those violent rivers which, when they are enraged, flood the plains, tear down trees and buildings, wash soil from one place to deposit it in another... Yet although such is their nature, it does not follow that when they are flowing quietly one cannot take precautions, constructing dykes and embankments so that when the river is in flood they would keep to one channel or their impetus be less wild and dangerous. So it is with fortune’.³⁷

Preparing for enlarging the polity required ensuring the necessary decision-making capacity and defence posture. Machiavelli was aware, however, that a commonwealth was unlikely to introduce the required constitutional improvements unless necessity made clear it might fall apart without them. ‘And since such a necessity cannot arise without danger, the commonwealth may easily be ruined before the new order has been brought to completion.’³⁸ In other words, those were times a polity would face its ‘Machiavellian moment’. The relevance of these warnings for the EU’s current predicament is evident. Since the Treaty of Nice of 2001, which cleared the way for the accession of ten new members in 2004, preparing for further enlargement has not been on the EU’s agenda in any meaningful manner. For Machiavelli, proceeding with expansion under such conditions is when fortune ‘shows her potency’ as ‘she knows there are no embankments and dykes built to restrain her’.³⁹

PRESERVING THE POLITY’S DECISION-MAKING CAPACITY

Machiavelli identified three broad manners of enlarging a polity. He rejected the Spartan and Athenian way of making other states subjects instead of partners and favoured the Roman model, which ‘consists in forming alliances in which you reserve to yourself the headship, the seat in which the central authority resides, and the right of initiative’.⁴⁰ Neither of these resemble the EU’s accession process. The Roman way requires a hegemonic system (much like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] during the Cold War era), but this does not correspond to the EU’s institutional setup. As explained by policy-makers from both large and small Member States, the EU polity is characterised by an ‘absence of hegemony’ thanks to ‘a system of rules, obligations and procedures of a detailed kind’, which ensures ‘that the rights of all Member States will be respected and that reconciliation between the larger ones will not be at the expense of the smaller’.⁴¹ In this context, EU enlargement comes closest to what Machiavelli presented as the Etruscan method, ‘namely, that of forming a league consisting of several republics in which no one of them had preference, authority or rank above the others; and in which, when other cities were acquired, they made them constituent members’.⁴² This is much like the EU’s non-imperial

mode of action whereby ‘the new Member States are to be treated on the basis of equality with the old Member States’.⁴³

The Etruscan decision-making model was centralised at the level of a Council composed of its member republics. For Machiavelli, this made expanding difficult:

‘Experience shows that such a method of forming a confederation has a fixed limit and that there is no case which indicates that this limit can be transcended. Twelve to fourteen communities join together, and beyond that they do not seek to go... Those who went beyond the appropriate limit, were speedily ruined’.⁴⁴

Machiavelli understood that Council decision-making between equals was becoming more challenging with each enlargement, resulting in weak commonwealths that ‘suffer from irresolution and cannot reach decisions; and, when they do arrive at one, it is due rather to necessity than to choice’.⁴⁵

While the problem of decision-making was primarily a question of the number of participants, it was seriously worsened if enlargement involved the inclusion of corrupted societies.

The Florentine administrator considered it entirely naïve to believe that a new member of an enlarged polity could be made to change its old habits. A corrupted society having acquired liberty thanks to its accession to an enlightened polity was most likely to fall back into corruption, notably due to the maneuvering of the old elites who grew fat on the riches of the previous regime.⁴⁶ The presence of corrupted members would automatically breed internal instability, thus rendering the whole commonwealth vulnerable to (foreign) manipulation, while damaging the functioning and decision-making of the extended polity.⁴⁷ This is highly relevant for the EU accession process. In December 2024, Transparency International reported that ‘all candidate countries are plagued by entrenched corruption’ and ‘few are making progress’, thus threatening the integrity of a widening EU.⁴⁸ This is particularly worrying as studies have shown that the EU’s accession conditionality in the fields of the rule of law have a suboptimal impact.⁴⁹

Machiavelli’s Etruscan model worked along confederal or intergovernmental premises. When taking its decisions on the basis of the Community method, the EU has moved significantly beyond the confederal system, to the benefit of the common interest (defended by the Commission), efficiency (thanks to qualified majority voting in the Council), democratic control (by the European Parliament), and judicial oversight (by the Court of Justice).⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in such fields as the common foreign and security policy, tax harmonisation, energy and climate policy, and aspects of social policy, unanimity in the Council is still applicable. The European Commission has recognised that

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in a larger EU, ‘unanimity will be even more difficult to reach, with increased risks of decisions being blocked by a single Member State’.⁵¹ As a remedy, it proposes to make use of the so-called ‘passerelle clauses’ in the current EU treaties, which allow the European Council to shift Council decision-making from unanimity to qualified majority in certain fields. But activating the ‘passerelle’ itself requires the agreement of all Member States. To convince reluctant members, the Commission suggests accompanying the use of qualified majority under the passerelle with an emergency break. This would allow any member to invoke exceptional national interest grounds to stop a decision by qualified majority and refer the matter to the European Council for further deliberations.⁵² While use of passerelle clauses might somewhat simplify decision-making in specific fields, it does not apply to defence issues, nor to the EU’s constitutional decision-making (which includes treaty revision and accession).⁵³ In these key areas, the expanding EU remains vulnerable to gridlock, much like the Etruscan confederation.

ENSURING THE POLITY’S DEFENCE CAPACITY

In Machiavelli’s conflictual times, expansion was inextricably linked to conquest and defence. Based on his Florentine experience, he considered commonwealths which failed to build up their own armed forces as ‘highly reprehensible’.⁵⁴ This was especially so for militarily weak polities that aimed to expand in a contested territory and for whom he considered enlargement a ‘poison’.⁵⁵ This analysis could not be more pertinent for today’s EU. Security and defence are at the heart of the present enlargement round. There is the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian occupation of parts of Moldova (Transnistria) and Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), and the hybrid attacks that are also targeting the Western Balkan countries. The EU’s level of preparation to accommodate the accession of countries at war or under severe threat seems minimal. The Commission’s 2024 Communication on pre-enlargement reforms laconically informs that new Member States ‘will contribute to and benefit from the EU’s additional security commitments’, notably those resulting from Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).⁵⁶ If an EU Member State is the victim of armed aggression, this provision holds that the other Member States have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. Even if each Member State remains free to decide on the type of assistance it wants to provide in such as case, the accession of countries such as Ukraine and Moldova would not be without consequences. If the war in Ukraine perdures, triggering the automatic assistance clause would directly bring the other EU Member States in the conflict. If a cease-fire or peace agreement were reached, the other Member States would necessarily become a backup for Ukraine in case Russia would not stick to its word. Similar questions arise with respect to Moldova and Georgia (should the accession negotiations with the latter be resumed). This is a problem since the EU has so far neglected to develop an autonomous military capacity and doctrine to ensure an effec-

tive common response by the Member States under Article 42(7) TEU.⁵⁷ This is directly linked to the fact that – up to now – NATO remains the foundation of Europe’s collective defence, at least for the 23 EU members that are part of the Atlantic Alliance.⁵⁸

In Machiavelli’s view, relying on ‘a powerful state to come to your defence and assistance’ is a dreadful non-solution for militarily weak commonwealths.⁵⁹ History taught him that external military support was almost always unreliable and expensive, while drastically reducing one’s freedom of action.⁶⁰ In the decades after the Second World War, Machiavelli’s warning did not seem to disturb Western Europe since a strong security dependence on the United States became its second nature.⁶¹ This remained true, even after European strategic thinkers raised serious questions about the trustworthiness of the American security guarantee.⁶² In January 2025, the advent of the second Trump administration dramatically brought the issue into the public eye. As a presidential candidate, Trump had commented that he would ‘encourage’ Russia to ‘do whatever the hell [it] wants’ with ‘delinquent’ European ‘allies’ that do not contribute enough to military spending. As president, he underlined that ‘the European Union was formed in order to screw the United States’, scolded Europe for unfairly ‘taking advantage’ of the United States, and insisted that Denmark hands over control of Greenland.⁶³ Leaving no doubt about its profound value differences with the European allies, the Trump administration started a bilateral process of rapprochement with Putin’s Russia, while largely ignoring the EU as an entity and undercutting Ukraine.⁶⁴ The Trump administration also made clear that Europe would need to provide the necessary security guarantees in case of a cease-fire in Ukraine, but without US backing or coverage under NATO’s Article 5.⁶⁵ Observers such as *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman concluded ‘that the US can no longer be regarded as a reliable ally for the Europeans’ and that ‘the Trump administration’s political ambitions for Europe mean that, for now, America is also an adversary – threatening democracy in Europe and even European territory, in the case of Greenland’.⁶⁶ It is dif-

ficult to find a more telling illustration of what Machiavelli considered the horrors of making a commonwealth dependent on the military protection by a more powerful

state. Of course, it is not the fault of the United States, but Europe’s own weakness that deprives it of autonomy in security and defence matters.⁶⁷

While the EU is currently engaged in a major effort to shore up its defence technological and industrial base, this does not yet constitute a credible operational capacity.⁶⁸ In this context, the priority of a true European Defence Union should be on a much deeper operational coordination between the military forces of the EU Member States, whereby the simplistic focus on ‘spending more’ shifts to ‘spending better and together’, in full synergy with the EU’s common operational necessities. As long as this is not happening, the EU will remain trapped in the Machiavellian ambition-capacity gap,

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which he summed up in a single sentence (as formulated by Tacitus): ‘quod nihil sit tam infirmum aut instabile quam fama potentiae non sua vi nixa’ (that nothing is so weak or unstable as a reputation for power which is not based on one’s own forces).⁶⁹ In this light, enlargement with countries such as Ukraine or Moldova remains a dangerous gamble for the EU.

CONCLUSIONS

The need for timely adaptation, before *fortuna* strikes, was one of the red threats throughout the *Discourses*.⁷⁰ With respect to the current enlargement round, the Machiavellian analysis lays bare that the EU still has a lot of work to accomplish before the accession of a significant number of new members can be considered sustainable, both in terms of decision-making capacity and defence posture. The arrival of the second Trump administration only accentuates this point. The European Commission has always been aware of the risk of ‘overstretch’, which is at the heart of the EU’s present Machiavellian moment. Already in 1992, the Commission wondered: ‘how can we ensure that “more” [Member States] does not lead to “less” [Union]?’⁷¹

According to Hannah Arendt, the history of political thought provides an answer to this crucial question.⁷² It takes the form of James Madison’s federal solution at the Convention of 1787 that created the United States Constitution in replacement of the Articles of Confederation. While separated by several centuries,

‘Machiavelli [who asked the right questions on the dilemmas of expanding polities] and the American Founders [who developed a workable response] were intellectual compatriots in a search for devices and institutions [...] for a new political world of extended territorial states’.⁷³

Ahead of the Constitutional Convention, Madison produced in-depth studies on a variety of confederations, showing that such structures always remained fragile and prone to collapse whenever members failed to reach a unanimous agreement.⁷⁴ Like Machiavelli, he discovered that the problem worsened to the degree those confederations expanded. Madison’s insights went hand in hand with Hamilton’s pleas for an autonomous polity with own resources that would free itself from the ‘impotence, perplexity, and disorder’ of unanimous decision-taking and would be able to defend itself through a standing army.⁷⁵ For Arendt, ‘Madison’s discovery of the federal principle for the foundation of large republics’ was the ‘greatest revolutionary innovation’, since it allowed a commonwealth to broaden its scope without weakening its collective power, democratic nature or the identity of its components.⁷⁶

Today’s EU needs its own ‘Federalist impulse’, adapted to its own ethos.⁷⁷ Turning the current EU into a full-fledged federation is not a realistic option. It should, however, continue to build on the unique institutional traits of the Community method, possibly

through the careful construction of a (pre-)federative core, a vanguard that pioneers the EU's further development in political and defence matters, while circumventing systematic objectors such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary.⁷⁸ What the Union should not do is to improvise itself back into intergovernmental or confederal non-solutions that have delivered ample proof of their incapacity to facilitate EU decision-making (notably in view of the EU's further enlargement) or solve problems of substance (such as the creation of a real common security and defence policy). Also, making the EU ready to welcome new Member States and lifting its international political and military relevance should not come at the expense of its founding values and its nonhegemonic and democratic nature. These considerations are particularly relevant in an analysis based on Machiavelli's writings. As Ardito's meticulous research has shown, the Florentine master was acutely aware of the 'grave risks' involved in crafting effective institutions to deal with matters of war and peace for an enlarging republic. 'Foremost was the danger that effective institutions would subvert the very republic they were designed to save' as had been shown in Rome's late republic, when 'the senate's approval of imperial expansion led to the prolongation of military commands [...] and the decline of the republic'.⁷⁹ In contrast, Machiavelli valued the importance of multiple decision-making checks as critical to the success of Rome's expansionist foreign policy in earlier times.⁸⁰ He also stood in awe of the Helvetic Confederation whose 'military strength did not destroy the liberty of its cities'.⁸¹ Knowing that expansion and militarisation often lead to greater centralisation and reduced levels of democracy, the EU would do well to take Machiavelli's concerns to heart and shape its future – as mentioned above – by deepening and widening the key components of the Community method as it has started to take shape in the 1950s, with its embedded checks and balances.⁸² This too is in line with Machiavelli's standards. Throughout the *Discourses*, he highlighted the existential importance of underpinning a commonwealth's constitutional renovations by the 'original principles' and 'pristine virtù' of its founders.⁸³ In preparing for the next EU enlargement, it is good to remember this message. 

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- 15 *Ibidem*, I.6, p. 123.
- 16 *Ibidem*, II.19, pp. 335–36.
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