

EU enlargement

Austria says EU must consider radical treaty change over Ukraine

Foreign minister calls for bloc to consider granting neighbouring states rapid access to ‘parts of the common market’



Alexander Schallenberg, Austria's foreign minister: 'Let's get our act together and put our money where our mouth is' © Hannibal Hanschke-Pool/Getty

Sam Jones in Vienna 3 May 2022

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The EU must consider radical treaty change if it is serious about Ukraine's membership and preventing it from succumbing to Russian domination, Austria's foreign minister has said.

Alexander Schallenberg told the Financial Times that Russia's war of aggression was a "geostrategic moment" for Europe that would require a more fundamental response than sanctions and economic and military aid to Ukraine.

"Let's get our act together and put our money where our mouth is," Schallenberg — a career diplomat, with years of experience in Brussels — said, warning that the EU could no longer afford to take half-measures towards neighbouring states.

"There is no vacuum. It's either our model or someone else's," he said, referring to

the future of countries bordering the EU, such as Ukraine and Moldova, now threatened by Russian revanchism.

His remarks are the strongest demonstration yet of Austria's shifting relationship with Moscow — and unusually frank in calling for Brussels to put realistic force behind its words in support of Ukraine.

Calling for a rethink of the EU's accession process, he said that the bloc should consider granting neighbouring states rapid access to “parts of the common market” and to selected EU institutions and programmes as a transitional process towards full membership, including participation in formal decision-making bodies.

“The 24th of February [the date of the Russian invasion] was a watershed, and I believe we have to think and use the maximum of our imagination, to not stick to the old ways, to not stick to the same template that we have used for every accession to the EU since Great Britain.”

Schallenberg, who briefly served as Austria's chancellor after Sebastian Kurz stepped down last year, was [criticised](#) by politicians across the EU last week for remarks that were taken to mean that Ukraine should wait in line behind existing candidate members, and that its membership was not likely for years.

He said his comments had been misinterpreted but stressed that the membership aspirations of countries in the western Balkans, such as Albania and North Macedonia, as well as Moldova — where Russia is also exercising [a destabilising influence](#) — should be considered an equal priority with Ukraine.

“We must anchor [all of] them in Europe, and in the west,” he said, calling for a change to the existing process to allow them to do so. Speaking of the Balkans, in particular, he said: “This is not just the back yard of Europe we are talking about, it's the patio. These are states surrounded by other EU member states.”

While Austria has condemned Russia's invasion and supported EU sanctions, as a non-Nato state with deep social and economic ties to Russia, it has also tried to cast itself as a mediator with Moscow.

In April Karl Nehammer, Austria's chancellor, became the first western leader [to meet Vladimir Putin](#), Russia's president, in person since the beginning of the conflict, in a visit to Moscow that was condemned by hawkish foreign policy experts across Europe.

Austria was under no illusions that Nehammer's intervention would achieve a breakthrough, Schallenberg said, but he had gained deeper perspective on Putin, who was stuck "in the logic of war" and "believes everything he says publicly behind closed doors".

Schallenberg urged Brussels "not to get lost in number crunching and laws and details" on the accession of new states and instead acknowledge that it needed to view admitting new members as a necessity to combat malign Russian influence. "Enlargement is not a legalistic, bureaucratic approach, it is a geostrategic instrument."

The possibility of the EU returning to the status quo with its neighbours, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, was over, he said.

"The Eastern Partnership we have developed does not work. It's gone," said Schallenberg, referring to the EU's official policy towards ex-Soviet states. "We have to rethink the whole conception [of the] neighbourhood policy of the EU."

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— **Benito Mueller, Oxford** 4 HOURS AGO

In December 2018, I argued in an OXPOL blog post that Brexit should be taken as a catalyst for European structural reform. Instead of negotiating a bilateral trade agreement, the UK trade relations with EU member states should be part of a New European Free Trade Association (NEFTA) treaty, including all EU member states as well as neighbouring countries such as the UK, and the current EFTA members (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland). There is absolutely no reason why such a new trading bloc could not also include other neighbours, such as the Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, and it makes much more sense to engage with them in that way rather than creating new second-tier partial EU members.

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