The prospects of EU enlargement should be kept alive, but with strict enlargement criteria.

The refugee crisis, the rise of terrorism and the economic crisis influences EU countries in being more cautious towards further enlargement.

We should not to lose sight of the European future of candidate countries.

On 4 May 2016, the Martens Centre organised an event entitled ‘Prospects for EU Enlargement after 2019’. The event served as a launch for the new Martens Centre paper The Long March towards the EU: Candidates, Neighbours and the Prospects for Enlargement by Konrad Niklewicz. The panel discussion was moderated by Vít Novotný, Senior Research Officer at the Martens Centre.

Joseph Daul, President of the European People’s Party, delivered the welcoming speech. Daul’s main message was that the negotiation process must not be stopped or slowed down, even if no candidate countries are currently ready to join the EU. It is fundamental not to lose sight of the European future of these countries. Nothing will stop candidate countries that respect the rules and criteria for membership from, eventually, joining the European family. Daul also delivered a clear message on the implementation of the EU-Turkey agreement stating that there will be no visa liberalisation for Turkey as long as the agreement is not properly implemented.

In presenting his paper, Niklewicz underlined that the economic, security and refugee crisis are making EU countries more cautious about enlarging further. It is in the interests of the EU to keep the prospects of enlargement alive, but under strict conditions. He also mentioned the latest parliamentary elections in Serbia as an example of EU-membership still being an aspiration for non-EU countries. Sandra Kalniete, a Member of the European Parliament and Vice-chair of the EPP Group, drew from the Latvian example and reminded the importance of sticking to the Copenhagen criteria: ‘tough love is the best love’. Johannes Noack, member of the Cabinet of Commissioner Hahn, argued that reforms needed before EU-membership should not be viewed as a burden but as being in the interest of the candidate countries themselves. Moreover, the refugee crisis has shown us the importance of collaborating closely with the candidate countries. Corina Stratulat, Senior Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre, described what she saw as a ‘Balkanisation of Europe’, as opposed to the desired ‘Europeanisation of the Balkans’. The EU enlargement policy is failing to effect building of democratic systems among candidate countries. The refugee crisis, the rise of terrorism and the economic crisis have all influenced negatively the attraction power of the EU. In addition, Stratulat argued that because of increased internal supervision mechanism such as the European Semester, it is now harder to join the EU. Therefore, a toughening of the accession criteria could further discourage candidate and future candidate countries, and some EU adaptation to specific country conditions is advisable.

The Q&A session addressed Serbia’s accession, the rise of Euroscepticism, enlargement fatigue, and the need for new accession conditions in a changing Europe. Niklewicz argued that there is no real need for a new set of rules as the Copenhagen criteria are still relevant for today’s EU. Kalniete stressed, based on the Latvian experience, the need for elites in accession countries to communicate with the public. Stratulat argued that even in the face of multiple crisis, the EU needs to continue to enlarge and not shut itself out.