

Enlargement

The entry of eight central and eastern European countries together with Cyprus and Malta into the European Union on 1 May 2004 was a historic achievement, ending centuries of division. Europe reunited means a stronger, democratic and more stable continent, with a single market providing economic benefits for all its 450 million citizens.

Enlargement is one of the EU's most successful policies and a powerful foreign policy tool. From 6 to 25 Member States the EU has progressively extended its zone of peace and democracy across the European continent. Bulgaria and Romania are expected to join in 2007. Croatia and Turkey are candidate countries with whom accession negotiations have just started.

At the 90s EU had already a history of successful enlargements. The Treaties of Paris (1951), establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and Rome (1957), establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and EURATOM, were signed by six founding members: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The EU then underwent four successive enlargements:

- » 1973 - Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom

- » 1981 - Greece

- » 1986 - Portugal and Spain

- » 1995 - Austria, Finland and Sweden

However, last enlargement posed a unique challenge, since it was without precedent in terms of scope and diversity: the number of candidates, the area (increase of 34%) and population (increase of 105 million), the wealth of different histories and cultures.

Soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the European Community quickly established diplomatic relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It removed long-standing import quotas on a number of products, extended the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) and, over the next few years, concluded Trade and Co-operation Agreements with Bulgaria, the former Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovenia. During the 1990s, the European Community and its Member States progressively concluded Association Agreements, so called 'Europe Agreements', with ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The Europe Agreements provide the legal basis for bilateral relations between these countries and the EU. The European Community had already established similar Association Agreements with Turkey (1963), Malta (1970) and Cyprus (1972). In the case of Turkey, a Customs Union entered into force in December 1995.

In the meantime, the European Community's PHARE programme, created in 1989, set out to provide financial support for the countries' efforts to reform and rebuild their economies. PHARE soon became the world's largest assistance programme in Central and Eastern Europe, providing technical expertise and investment support.

In 1993, at the Copenhagen European Council, the Union took a decisive step towards the current enlargement, agreeing that "the associated countries in Central and Eastern Europe that so desire shall become members of the European Union." Thus, enlargement was no longer a question of 'if', but 'when'.

Concerning the timing, the European Council states: "Accession will take place as soon as an associated

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country is able to assume the obligations of membership by satisfying the economic and political conditions required." At the same time, it defined the membership criteria, which are often referred to as the 'Copenhagen criteria':

- » stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;

- » the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union;

- » the ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic & monetary union.

Membership criteria also require that the candidate country must have created the conditions for its integration through the adjustment of its administrative structures, as underlined by the Madrid European Council in December 1995. While it is important that European Community legislation is transposed into national legislation, it is even more important that the legislation is implemented effectively through appropriate administrative and judicial structures.

At its Summit in Luxembourg in December 1997, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations on 31 March 1998 with six countries, as recommended by the European Commission: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. The Helsinki European Council in December 1999 launched the second wave of accession negotiations with Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia and Malta.

In order to assess progress achieved by each country in preparing for accession, the Commission submits yearly Regular Reports to the Council. The reports serve as a basis for the Council to take decisions on the conduct of the negotiations or their extension to other candidates on the basis of the accession criteria .

Negotiations are held in the form of Intergovernmental Conferences of EU Member states with the candidate countries. The negotiation sessions are held at the level of Ministers or Deputy Ministers, i.e. Permanent Representatives of the Member States and Ambassadors or Chief Negotiators for the candidate countries. On the European Union side, the 25 Member States are the parties to the accession negotiations.

The European Commission proposes the common draft negotiating positions. The Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which rotates among the member states every six months, presents the negotiating positions agreed by the Council and chairs negotiating sessions.

Each applicant country draws up its position on each of the 31 chapters of the EU acquis, to engage in negotiations.

On the basis of its fifth set of Regular Reports, presented in October 2002, the Commission recommended to the European Council to conclude the accession negotiations with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia, the countries being ready for membership from the beginning of 2004. These countries signed the Accession Treaty in April 2003 in Athens.

Regarding Cyprus the EU position is that it hopes to see a re-united Cyprus among its Member states. All parties concerned and, in particular Turkey, are urged to lend full support to efforts to reach a comprehensive settlement on the divided island. The Commission made considerable resources available

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to support the northern part of the island to catch up and to back up a settlement.

The Commission considered that a specific safeguard clause had to be introduced in the Accession Treaty. This clause allows the Commission for a limited period of time to take appropriate safeguard measures in the internal market field.

Bulgaria and Romania have set 2007 as their indicative date for accession. The Commission strongly supports the two countries in achieving this objective, which will continue to be guided by the principles of differentiation and own merits. In order to prepare Bulgaria and Romania for membership in the European Union, an increased focus will be put on judicial and administrative reform. Furthermore, pre-accession assistance provided to Bulgaria and Romania is increased considerably from the date of the first round of accessions.