

EU enlargement – the reasons why

10 October 2012

Today/this Wednesday, the European Commission will adopt its latest assessment of the readiness of the countries of the Western Balkans, Turkey and Iceland to join the European Union. The report will contain detailed information on exactly where the various applicant countries stand in terms of European reforms and European integration and will be submitted to the Member States of the EU who together with the European Commission will draw operational conclusions towards the end of this year.

This report on the state of play with regard to EU enlargement is no uncontroversial thing. Around Europe, there are voices who speak up against enlargement. Why, do they ask, are we continuing with enlargement in the European Union? With the recent global financial crisis, the present difficulties in the Eurozone and instability in parts of our neighbourhood, haven't we enough problems already without the added burden of taking in new members?

First, we do this because the EU should keep the promises it has made to those European democracies that today strive to join the EU.

Second, because we know how important a credible EU integration process is for the applicant countries. The European Union's enlargement policy is about the legitimate aspirations of the people of our continent to join together as part of a common democratic project.

Third, we are convinced that enlargement is a good thing for Europe as a whole, including for the countries that are already members of the EU. It is in our view part of the solution to some of the problems that our continent is facing, and not – as some of the critics would argue – part of the problem.

Enlargement promotes economic and financial stability and supports increased trade and business opportunities in the aspiring countries which, with our interconnected economies, is in all our interest since it translates into more growth and jobs. For example, in the seven years leading to the last enlargement, trade between the EU-15 and countries that joined in 2004 and 2007 grew threefold, and this trend continues.

Enlargement helps secure a pole of peace and stability in a region whose neighbourhood has become all the more fragile following the upheaval of the Arab spring. If we are to play a credible role on the world stage we need to start closer to home by exercising leadership in consolidating stability in our own backyard. We have already achieved a lot in this regard. Take the Western Balkans as an example. Less than twenty years ago it was seen as a place of destruction and despair. Now it is consolidating peace and stability through a clear European Union perspective: Croatia should join in 2013, we have started membership negotiations with Montenegro, and Serbia has been awarded candidate status

Democratic European countries that want to be part of the EU need to be capable of joining without importing difficulties. We set strict conditions for membership. In practice this means that we don't rush through the enlargement process without being sure that countries are ready to be EU members. We have learnt lessons from previous enlargements which have highlighted how

important it is to work on strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law and the fight against corruption and organised crime. Our focus on the rule of law and economic development are the main elements ensuring stability and reducing the risks of illegal immigration and infiltration of criminality. We work hard every day to address these issues in depth at an early stage in negotiations and our negotiating mechanisms are designed to take the concerns of EU citizens into account.

We work on the present, but also on the future. We want to be sure that countries that will join will be able not only to fully implement EU rules but also to face future challenges. We are referring in particular to economic governance where the European Union has embarked on making far reaching changes. It is important that enlargement countries are associated as closely as possible to this process. This will help them to get the sound financial rules and budgets in place and get their houses in order before they join. And, with the interdependency of our economies, this will help the European Union as well.

Our enlargement policy is leading to deep democratic and economic transformation in countries seeking to join. It is acting as a catalyst for change and it is changing them for the better. This transformation is built on the same foundation stones on which our Union is constructed. It is part of our vision of an inclusive Europe. It is in our DNA. In fifty-five years we have grown from the original six to twenty seven, soon to be twenty eight. We want to move on with enlargement but we will move carefully, making sure that countries are fully ready to join and always keeping in mind the need to preserve the EU construction.

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