

Maintaining momentum for EU enlargement

Joint article by Lucinda Creighton Irish Minister for European Affairs, and Štefan Füle European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy

Six years after its last enlargement, this year will again see the European Union admitting a new member. Croatia is expected to join on 1st July and others wish to follow.

Croatia's entry provides fresh evidence of the transformative power of EU enlargement policy: torn by conflict only two decades ago, the country is now a stable democracy, capable of taking on the obligations of EU membership and of adhering to EU standards. This transformation is also a powerful signal for all the potential candidates in the region.

The perspective of European integration remains open to the whole Western Balkans region. Accession talks are in progress with Iceland and we hope for progress in putting the accession negotiations with Turkey back on track. Of course, EU accession is not taking place in a vacuum; in the current economic climate, people on both sides are increasingly concerned about how it may impact on their lives. The enlargement process reflects these concerns; it is based on strict conditionality, with each step forward based on real progress achieved on the ground, and agreed by all the actors. It is also based on lessons learnt. We focus on the credibility of the process, putting rule of law at its centre. In particular, for countries in transformation, enlargement is not about ticking boxes but about implementation and creating a track record in areas such as fundamental rights and freedoms, rule of law, good governance and democracy.

The European Commission and the Irish Presidency of the EU Council are committed to this approach and to continued support for candidates and potential candidates in their efforts to move towards EU membership.

Enlargement is a key policy of the EU. It is not part of the current problems in Europe. It is part of the solution. The primary goal is to strengthen the EU. The year 2013 is promising in this regard. Following an agreement of EU Member States, the European Commission will release a number of reports this Spring. On the basis of these reports, the EU Member States, under the leadership of the Irish Presidency, will consider whether sufficient progress has been made to open accession negotiations with Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and to approve a mandate to start negotiations with Kosovo on a Stabilisation and Association Agreement. For Montenegro, the first so-called "screening" phase of negotiations has already been concluded in the key areas of judiciary, fundamental rights, justice, freedom and security, and the country now needs to develop action plans to move forward in these areas. EU candidate status remains within reach for Albania and the conduct of this year's elections will be a crucial litmus test for democracy there. With the accession of Croatia, the EU will literally touch Bosnia and Herzegovina; the shared EU border can become a real bridge if the country can focus on reforms.

It is for the candidates to be aware of opportunities and to make full use of the momentum created for enlargement this year. Those who talk about so called "enlargement fatigue" should understand that the real and bigger danger is reform fatigue.

Respect for the rule of law, democratic principles and human rights remains at the centre of the enlargement process. Strengthened rule of law improves the capacity to tackle organised

crime and corruption, bringing direct benefits to citizens. So too does progress in the application of human rights and democratic standards and freedoms.

This year is full of opportunities for enlargement. How these opportunities will be used is in the hands of the candidates and potential candidates. We, on behalf of the EU, can confirm that we remain committed to the process and will keep our promise – to move you closer to the EU once the necessary reforms are delivered and the criteria have been met.