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Future Enlargement of the EU

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Background

The original six nation European Community has proceeded through a series of enlargements. First in 1973 came Britain, Denmark and Ireland; followed in 1979 by Greece, in 1986 by Portugal and Spain and then, in the last of the old wave, in 1995: Austria, Finland and Sweden.

The new applicants in the early 1990s were mostly eastern and central European nations that had recently been communist countries in the Warsaw Pact. Faced with this prospect, in June 1993 the Copenhagen European Council established that a candidate country must have achieved the so-called **Copenhagen criteria** before it could accede to the EU:

- *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.*

May 2004 duly saw the accession of Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia and Hungary along with Cyprus and Malta. Bulgaria and Romania, behind the others in governance and administrative capacity, were delayed and joined only in 2007, bringing the EU to its present 27 members.

This process of enlargement has been an astonishing success story. Not only has it gone smoothly in technical terms, with no failed accession negotiations since Britain was vetoed twice by General de Gaulle in the 1960s and no insurmountable post-accession problems, it has brought substantial benefits in the way of increased security, stability and prosperity to both new and existing member states. Many fears expressed at the time of successive enlargements (excessive cost and stalling the internal development of the enlarged Union, for example) have been shown to be unfounded or excessive. Moreover enlargement has proved to be a remarkable transformational instrument, consolidating both the transition of three recently authoritarian south European regimes (Greece, Portugal and Spain) into democracies, and similarly that of the former communist countries of central and eastern Europe into market economies and democracies.

Since the enlargement in 2004, however, voices have been raised against further expansion, in particular to include Turkey, and it was suggested that the defeat of the European Constitutional Treaty in the 2005 French and Dutch referendums was partly due to a backlash against the idea of Turkish membership.

Reflecting these and parallel concerns, when the European Council awarded the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia candidate status in December 2005, it not only referred to the need for further progress before the FYR of Macedonia could join but also added that “the absorption capacity of the Union also has to be taken into account”.

A separate briefing paper covers the related topic of the EU's neighbourhood policy; this is relevant to enlargement because some of the neighbouring countries have indicated that they intend to apply for EU membership in the future.

Future enlargement

There is much unfinished business on the Union's enlargement agenda:

i) Turkey

Turkey is by far the biggest applicant and the one whose admission presents the biggest problems. The possibility of membership was set out in its 1962 association agreement with the European Community and has been reaffirmed since, so it is hard to sustain the argument that it is beyond any, so far never defined, European geographical limits. (According to the Treaty of Rome “any European State may apply to become a member of the Community” (Article 237) but no definition of “Europe” was given then or since). The accession negotiations that opened in October 2005 must overcome considerable technical obstacles, as well as political problems over governance, human rights and Cyprus. But there will also be great opportunities, both strategically and economically, for the Union in accepting a Muslim country which is a secular state, in extending the Single Market from the present Customs Union between Turkey and the EU to fully include a large and rapidly expanding economy and in harnessing to the Common Foreign and Security Policy a new player with some formidable assets. The issue of Turkish membership is discussed at greater length in our briefing paper, *The EU & Turkey*.

ii) The Western Balkan countries (Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo)

The Union has now opened accession negotiations with Croatia following certification that it is cooperating fully with the International Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (in the tracking down and detention of suspected war criminals). It is thought likely that Croatia will join the EU in 2011. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was also granted candidate status at the European Council of December 2005 but the opening of accession negotiations is still some way off as the Commission believes that FYR Macedonia does not yet meet the political criteria for membership (for example, recent elections were not properly conducted and corruption is still widespread).

The Montenegrin Parliament, in its declaration of independence, stated that accelerating her membership of the EU was a “strategic priority” and a stabilisation and association agreement between the EU and Montenegro has been agreed since then. Montenegro made a formal application for EU membership in December 2008; this was the first step in a process that will take some time as there are significant corruption and other governance problems within Montenegro that will need to be resolved before accession negotiations can begin.

Serbia is keen to join the EU but the problem of Kosovo is a significant obstacle to her joining. Nonetheless, Serbia signed a stabilisation and association agreement with the EU in April 2008 – the first step on the road to eventual membership. The arrest and removal to the Hague tribunal of the wanted former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic in July 2008 further boosted Serbia's chances.

The Balkan countries are all - in different ways and at different speeds - aspirants for membership, and to all of them that prospect has been held out by the Union. To remove or qualify this strong incentive risks undermining their still fragile transition to free market economies and working democracies. If the path to membership were blocked, there could be a recurrence of the serious security problems of the sort experienced by Europe in the 1990s, and the handling of the threat from organised crime would be set back considerably.

iii) The EFTA countries (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland)

Neither Norway nor Switzerland are at present is likely to apply (in Norway's case apply again) for membership in the near future. If any of those countries were to apply, it is virtually inconceivable that they would be rejected as an issue of principle since they fulfil all the "Copenhagen criteria" for membership and would present no major problems over absorption. There could, regardless, be difficult negotiations over fisheries (Norway and Iceland) and agriculture (Switzerland and Norway), as well as over the interface between Swiss constitutional practice and the Union's decision-making processes.

The situation in Iceland has changed because of the dramatic collapse of the Icelandic banking sector in the autumn of 2008. These events exposed Iceland's vulnerability as a very small economy on the fringes of Europe and in particular the weakness of its currency. One of the parties in the governing coalition is in favour of EU membership (the Social Democratic Alliance) and the other (the Independence Party) having been strongly opposed in the past, said that it would reconsider its position in 2009.

iv) Eastern Neighbours (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan)

These countries have become an important part of the EU's neighbourhood policy and several have ambitions to join the EU in due course. None of them has yet formally applied for membership and there are divisions amongst EU Members about their joining. In most of them the distant prospect of accession is part of the political scenery, often helpfully so, as it is encouraging market and political reforms. None of them would find it easy to fulfil the "Copenhagen criteria", but it is by no means sure that they will not make dramatic progress in that direction at some point in the future (as has certainly been the case in Georgia and which in time may be the case in the Ukraine). The Georgian President has suggested that it would be ready to apply to the EU for membership in 2011.

v) Russia

The possibility of Russia aspiring to membership is totally discounted by its own leaders and there is no serious prospect of that changing.

Enlargement & Britain

The issue of enlargement has so far never been particularly contentious in British domestic political terms. Some support it because they calculate that it would be likely to slow or stop further moves towards integration. But, as this briefing note shows, it has become more sensitive and more contentious in the Union as a whole and is likely to remain so in the future. Britain's approach will be to support further enlargement so long as any candidates meet the "Copenhagen criteria" and are capable of assuming the responsibilities of full membership. Enlargement is one of a range of positive policies for the Union on which Britain should be able to play a leading role.

Conclusion

It is difficult to speculate about the future progress of EU enlargement policy given the strong position taken by France in respect of Turkey and the damage done to the cause of enlargement by the probably premature admission of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. There are also concerns about the EU's capacity to absorb new members. The process of enlargement has, nevertheless, been very successful in stabilising our continent and boosting Europe's prosperity.

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Senior European Experts

The Senior European Experts Group is an independent body consisting of former high-ranking British diplomats and civil servants, including several former UK ambassadors to the EU, and former officials of the institutions of the EU.

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