

Enlargement of the European Union

Since its establishment by its six founding members in 1957, the European Union has increased in size to 27 Member States and more countries are waiting to join. Croatia, Iceland, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Turkey are all candidate countries (although negotiations have not yet started with FYROM) and Albania, Montenegro and Serbia have all applied to join too. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo are also keen to become members of the European Union.

Enlargement: An opportunity for the European Union and its new Member States

The most recent enlargement of the European Union helped to shore up democracy, the rule of law and security in Europe. It also gave the Union greater influence in addressing global challenges such as climate change, competitiveness and energy security. The Member States work together in resolving their shared problems and defending their common interests. Enlargement between 2004-2007, which saw 10 Central and Eastern European countries accede to the EU, was also of immense symbolic importance in marking the end of the Cold War division of the continental Europe.

Enlargement has also boosted economic growth and increased the prosperity of the European Union. The enlarged Union has a common market of nearly 500 million people, all subject to the same rules governing competition, product quality and environmental protection.

However, enlargement of the Union needs to be accompanied by a deepening of the Union, entailing closer links between the Member States. An EU of 27 Member States cannot function in the same way as a Union of six Member States. The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1 December 2009 considerably deepened these links, by adapting the Union's decision-making processes to the situation, so that it can continue to function in an organised, efficient manner.

How can a country join the European Union?

The Treaty on European Union states that "any European state which respects the principles of liberty, democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, principles which are common to the Member States, may apply to join the Union". These provisions of the Treaty were supplemented by more specific prerequisites for accession known as the **Copenhagen criteria**, which the European Council adopted in Copenhagen in 1993 and require that the candidate country has:

- stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities;
- a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union;
- the ability to take on the obligations of membership, notably adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

Moreover, since the European Council in Madrid in 1995, candidate countries also need to adapt their administrative structures to pave the way for progressive and harmonious integration. At the same time, the European Union needs to be able to integrate any new members.

Certain political criteria, such as respect for human rights and democracy, also need to be met before the European Council can decide to launch accession negotiations.

Finally, candidate countries must prove that they will be capable of fulfilling their role as Member States. This means obtaining broad public support and complying with the European Union's strict political, legal and technological standards. In practice, negotiations entail the adoption of the 'Community acquis' by the candidate country, meaning everything jointly adopted by the European Union, i.e. the basic treaties and all the detailed laws and rules in force in Europe. Accordingly, any country wishing to join the European Union will have to adapt its old laws and rules to European legislation, which runs to tens of thousands of pages. Since this involves profound change, accession negotiations are staggered over several years.

During the Belgian Presidency

In keeping with the renewed consensus on enlargement reached in December 2006, the Belgian Presidency will continue the negotiations under way in accordance with the progress and merits of each candidate country.

Accession negotiations with Croatia have now entered their final phase. The Belgian Presidency will support and monitor Croatia's efforts to conclude these negotiations as soon as the criteria have been met. The Belgian Presidency also intends to encourage Turkey to pursue the reforms needed to fully meet the Copenhagen criteria, so that negotiations on the chapters of the Community acquis can be opened and closed. These efforts will help to maintain the momentum of the accession negotiations started in November 2005. The framework for negotiations with Iceland will also be adopted under the Belgian Presidency and some chapters may also be opened, provided that the relevant screening reports have been finalised.

Since the Commission has recommended that accession negotiations be launched with the FYROM the Belgian Presidency will endeavour to broker a consensus on these negotiations within the Council.

The Belgian Presidency will strive to support the respective headway made by other Balkan states on the way to the region's stabilisation and their rapprochement with the European Union, as mapped out by the Zagreb and Thessaloniki summits. This will involve encouraging them to shore up their regional cooperation and use every available means, especially under the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP).

