

How far can enlargement go?

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How far can enlargement go?

The enlargement of the European Union will continue, but its limits are not set by the 1993 Copenhagen criteria. Article 49 of the EU Treaty (formerly Article 237 of the EEC Treaty) stipulates that ‘Any European State [...] may apply to become a member of the Union’. Morocco’s application for accession to the EEC was refused because the country is not in Europe.

Enlargement to include the 10 countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Communist regimes was regarded as a ‘historical duty’ in order to put an end to the division of Europe. Once this was accomplished, another concern arose, namely how to ensure the security of the enlarged Union bordered by unstable neighbouring countries. The only solution envisaged was to include the latter countries in the Union as well. Accordingly, the process of enlargement began to gather momentum, although not without giving rise to reservations and criticism.

This was the solution adopted in order to solve the problem of the Western Balkans, devastated by the ethnic wars which followed the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation and led to the intervention of European States in Bosnia and Kosovo under the aegis of the UN and NATO. As early as 1999, the Helsinki European Council adopted a stabilisation and association process. Croatia signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement on 29 October 2001, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia on 9 April 2001, Albania on 12 June 2006 and Montenegro on 15 March 2007. EU–Balkans Summits have also been held regularly since the first meeting in Zagreb on 24 November 2000. A programme of ‘Community assistance for reconstruction, development and stabilisation’ was also planned for the period 2000–2006. The countries involved were Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia-Montenegro, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania. In December 2002, when the Copenhagen European Council decided to admit the 10 new Member States, it also confirmed its intention that the five Balkan countries were entitled to accede to the Union.

Croatia applied for EU accession on 21 February 2003. The Commission delivered a favourable opinion on 20 April 2004 and proposed a pre-accession partnership. Accession negotiations began in October 2005. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia applied for accession on 22 March 2004, after having signed an Association Agreement, like Croatia. The other countries, however, are at a much less advanced stage. Bosnia’s application for association, submitted in November 2003, did not receive a favourable opinion from the Commission. In November 2005, negotiations were opened with a view to the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The EU’s relations with Serbia are dependent on the negotiations on the future status of Kosovo (autonomous within Serbia or independent). Since Montenegro’s independence on 22 May 2006, this country has signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union (on 15 March 2007). As for Albania, negotiations were opened on 13 February 2003 for an Association Agreement and led to the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union on 12 June 2006.

Accordingly, the Europe of 27 Member States could, in time, become a Europe of 32, even if, shortly after the latest enlargement to include 27 Member States, only 3 countries are officially candidates for accession, namely Croatia, Turkey and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Accession negotiations with Croatia and Turkey began on 3 October 2005. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia became a candidate country in December 2005, but accession negotiations have not yet begun. In addition, two European States which have until now remained outside the Union could also decide to join it. Norway is a country associated under the Schengen Agreement and a member of the European Economic Area. It must, therefore, apply a considerable number of EU directives and regulations, without having any say in their substance. It has to contribute to the funding required for EU enlargement to include new Member States because it will have access to their markets. This has given rise to a feeling of marginalisation which could lead to a new debate on accession, something which was rejected in 1972 and 1994. As for Switzerland, which applied for accession in May 1992 only to withdraw its application and reject participation in the European Economic Area, it has signed an increasing number of bilateral agreements with the EU, to which it is gradually coming closer, leaving open the possibility of a new application for accession. Both Norway and Switzerland already meet the accession criteria.

Other countries form part of the European geographical area and share its culture. Accession to the European Union is a possibility for some of them.

In the case of Russia, for example, part of its territory is European. However, Russia forms a Euro-Asian geopolitical entity which is spread over two continents and is therefore distinct from Europe as such, since the geographical boundary marked by the Urals is a merely theoretical one. Russia's accession to the European Union would completely destabilise it. Moreover, Russia would not meet the criteria, since it does not have a sufficiently democratic regime or a true market economy. However, it is keen to develop its relations with the European Union, its principal trading partner. That is why it signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU on 24 June 1994. The 11th EU–Russia Summit, held in St. Petersburg in May 2003, was the first meeting between the Russian Head of State and the Heads of State or Government of the 15 EU Member States and the 10 countries which would accede in May 2004. At this Summit, a Permanent Partnership Council was established and four 'Common Spaces' created: a Common Economic Space which includes environmental and energy issues, a Common Space of Freedom, Security and Justice, a Common Space of Cooperation in the Field of External Security, and a Common Space on Research, Education and Culture.

The question of possible accession also arises for some of the other ex-Soviet Union satellites which are situated in Europe and with which the European Union has concluded partnership agreements: Ukraine (14 June 1994), Moldova (28 November 1994) and Belarus (6 March 1995), even though the last of these would not be ratified.

For Belarus, such a possibility is out of the question as long as it has a dictator as President and a Soviet-style economic system. As far as Russia is concerned, Belarus occupies a strategic position, since Russian gas pipelines pass through it on their way to the West. A treaty was signed on 2 April 1996 strengthening economic and political integration between the two countries and, hence, strengthening Russia's influence on Belarus.

Ukraine's case is different: it is clearly separated from Russia and has adopted a Presidential-type regime with a Parliament, and it has also launched economic reforms, including some privatisation. A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union was signed on 1 March 1998. At the same time, pro-Western political forces are seeking to move the country closer to the European Union and to NATO in order to assert its independence, but it has to humour Russia, which controls large sections of its economy and exerts pressure via the considerable number of Russians in the country.

As for Moldova, a former Romanian province which was integrated into the Soviet Union after the Second World War and became independent in 1991 after the break-up of the USSR, it wants to join the EU, particularly since Romania acceded in 2007. However, Moldova is still governed by a Communist-type regime, and its economic reforms have been unsuccessful. It is the poorest country in Europe, and many of its inhabitants are emigrating to the European Union. Above all, Russians have settled in the eastern part of Moldova, in Transnistria. The majority Russian–Ukrainian population in Transnistria voted in favour of Transnistria's independence in 1991, requesting that it be attached to Russia or Ukraine. In 1992, a war broke out between the separatists of Transnistria, supported by Russia, and the central government in Chişinău, Moldova's capital. That same year, Presidents Yeltsin and Snegur signed a peace agreement. However, Transnistria's independence has not been recognised at international level. Moreover, Russia has not honoured its commitment made in 1999 to withdraw from Transnistria. It still retains military bases there, which enable it to monitor Ukraine as well as any NATO installations in Romania; however, this is the source of many trafficking operations. Since Romania's accession to the European Union, efforts to guard the border have been strengthened. The coordination of controls at the EU's external borders is the responsibility of the European agency Frontex, established on 26 October 2004 and operational since 5 October 2005. In late June 2004, NATO called on Russia to withdraw from its bases. Meanwhile, there have been regular demonstrations in Moldova in favour of once more becoming part of Romania and, hence, of the European Union.