

The enlargements of the European Union

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_enlargements_of_the_european_union-en-596c5cae-3f7f-45d4-a51b-8ea2311279of.html

Last updated: 08/07/2016



The enlargements of the European Union

The European Union wanted to put an end to the division of Europe that had occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War. It therefore responded favourably to applications for accession to the EU from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), together with Malta and Cyprus. In addition to its symbolic value, the fifth enlargement of the European Union, effective as from 1 May 2004, made it possible to establish lasting peace throughout the continent of Europe, to stimulate economic and commercial growth and to enhance the Union's position on the international scene.

However, in order to be able to function successfully, a European Union enlarged to include 25 Member States needed to adapt its objectives and its institutional and decision-making structures. Hence the conclusion of the Treaty of Nice in February 2001 and the establishment of the European Convention in February 2002 tasked with considering the key issues raised by the Union's future development and with trying to identify the various possible responses. Its work culminated in the production of a draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, adopted by consensus by the Convention on 13 June and 10 July 2003. The 10 new Member States, which signed their Treaty of Accession on 16 April 2003, immediately took part in the work of the Convention as observers, along with the three other candidate countries, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. The Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe was finally signed by the 25 Heads of State or Government on 29 October 2004 in Rome, and the three candidate countries initialled the Final Act as observers. Following the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by France in May 2005 and the Netherlands in June 2005, the institutional reforms will take effect only once the Treaty of Lisbon enters into force.

The successive enlargements of the European Union pose many challenges, including the issue of the EU's identity and its policy objectives, and inevitably raise the controversial question of its borders and their limits. For, already taking shape on the horizon is the accession of Croatia, with which the EU began accession negotiations on 3 October 2005. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was granted the status of candidate country after submitting its request for accession in March 2004, while the Balkan countries involved in the process of stabilisation and association (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia including Kosovo) were officially recognised as also having the potential to join the European Union. At the same time, Turkey, which has had an Association Agreement with the European Economic Community since 1963, was encouraged by the European Union to continue its reforms with a view to meeting the economic and political criteria for accession. Having obtained the status of EU candidate country in 1999, accession negotiations with Turkey were launched on 3 October 2005.