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Questions and answers on the Union's enlargement strategy and its integration capacity

Which country will join next and when? Will there be another "big bang"?

The present enlargement agenda covers the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey. These countries are at various stages on their road towards the EU. Negotiations with Croatia and Turkey were opened in late 2005. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia became a candidate country in December 2005. The other Western Balkan countries are making progress towards fulfilling their European perspective. The key principle is that each country advances towards accession depending on its own merits. It is too early to speculate about when the next accession will take place.

At present, it appears unlikely that a large group of countries will in future accede simultaneously. The candidates and potential candidates vary considerably in terms of their political and economic development and administrative capacity. Further accessions are likely to occur in the medium to long term, given the present state of pre-accession preparations.

Will the EU enlargement be frozen as long as the Constitutional treaty is not adopted?

A new institutional settlement should have been reached by the time the next new member is likely to be ready to join the Union. While the EU prepares internally for further institutional reforms, the carefully managed accession process continues.

This means no sabbatical from our commitments to the countries of South-eastern Europe, which constitute our consolidated enlargement agenda.

The biggest benefit of the enlargement process is the EU's ability to foster peace, prosperity and stability in Europe. The EU will have to be engaged in the Balkans, it is much more effective and cheaper to encourage these countries to remain "on track" by offering them the European perspective than to run international protectorates and military operations. We also have an unparalleled opportunity to encourage Turkey's development, towards an open society with fundamental freedoms and building a bridge to the Muslim world. A more 'European' Turkey is in our interest, given the country's significance as an anchor of stability in a troubled region.

Why does the EU continue to enlarge?

The EU Member States have given the perspective of becoming EU members to the countries of the Western Balkans and to Turkey once they fulfil the necessary conditions. Commitments need to be honoured, because their eventual accession is in the interest of the Union. At the same time, the EU is cautious about assuming any new commitments in order to avoid an overstretched enlargement agenda. Honouring our existing commitments is an incentive for these countries to continue their reforms. These reforms directly benefit European citizens today. Sticking to our commitments is also a matter of ensuring the EU's credibility as a global partner. *"Pacta sunt servanda"*.

A carefully managed enlargement is in the interest of the EU. The EU, which started with six members only, has benefited enormously from enlarging over time. Politically, it has helped respond to major changes such as the collapse of communism. It has consolidated democracy, human rights and stability across the continent. Economically, enlargement has increased prosperity and competitiveness, enabling the enlarged Union to respond better to the challenges of globalisation. This has brought direct benefits for Europe as a whole. Enlargement has increased the EU's weight in the world, and made the Union a stronger international player.

What has the EU learnt from previous enlargements?

The fifth enlargement has been carefully prepared by the EU through the pre-accession strategies. It has been successful. The ten member states which joined in 2004 have continued their smooth integration into EU institutions and policies. They have an excellent level of compliance with EU law and have made a significant contribution to the work of the EU's institutions. This success was largely due to careful preparations through the enhanced pre-accession strategies and well-managed accession negotiations.

The Commission has drawn some lessons to further improve the preparation of future enlargements. Some of them are already being applied in practice. In particular, it has introduced benchmarks to open and close negotiations on individual chapters and is emphasising political issues more. The accession of Bulgaria and Romania provide a number of other lessons for the future, such as the need to tackle at an early stage issues such as public administration reform, judicial reform or the fight against corruption.

Are there final borders Europe or will enlargement continue forever?

Not all European countries are involved in the enlargement process. The EU has established a variety of relations with other countries, including through the European Economic Area, bilateral ties with Switzerland, the European Neighbourhood Policy, and a strategic partnership with Russia.

The question of the ultimate borders of the European Union has been raised in recent years. This has enabled the Commission to draw a number of conclusions. The term 'European' combines geographical, historical and cultural elements which all contribute to European identity. The shared experience of ideas, values and historical interaction cannot be condensed into a simple timeless formula, and it is subject to review by each succeeding generation.

The legal basis of the enlargement is Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, which states that "*Any European State which respects the principles set out in Article 6(1) may apply to become a member of the Union*". However, this treaty provision does not mean that all European countries must apply, or that the EU must accept all applications. The European Union is first and foremost defined by its values.

What can the Commission do about of 'enlargement fatigue'?

The EU needs to communicate better the advantages and the challenges of enlargement. Its successes are remarkable. It is primarily the task of the Member States and the candidate countries to explain and defend the choices they have made and will make with regard to further enlargements. Leaders at national, regional and local level are best placed to understand the concerns of their constituents and to communicate directly with them. Member States which are themselves committed to the enlargement process need to explain better to citizens the concrete benefits from enlargement.

The Commission will play its part together with the European Parliament, national, regional and local authorities, academic institutions and think tanks, and civil society. In particular, the Commission will improve the availability of factual information in user-friendly form. This concerns both enlargement policy issues, and practicalities such as the application of conditionality through monitoring reforms, setting benchmarks, and making impact assessments.

How much money are we paying to these countries and what is it being used for?

From 1 January 2007, the EU will use a new financial tool for promoting modernisation, reform and alignment with the EU's legal order, the Instrument of Pre-Accession (IPA). This will entirely replace previous assistance instruments such as Phare, Cards, Ispa and Sapard. Candidate countries as well as potential candidate countries are eligible to funding under the new instrument. A single set of rules and procedures and more flexibility will provide greater impact and value for money in the allocation of EU funds. The Western Balkan countries and Turkey will benefit from almost €11.5 billion over the next seven years. The Commission is presenting a multi-annual financial framework, which sets out indicative amounts for allocation of IPA funds for each country and for each major component ¹.

¹ See Memo/06/410