Has the EU’s enlargement strategy been successful?

The European Union has now spread well beyond its original geographic boundaries, a fact that is reflective of the significant impact of enlargement policy within the EU. For many commentators, enlargement represents the key policy success of EU external relations activity, although action on enlargement has slowed in recent years as other issues such as the financial crisis, migration, Brexit and disagreements among Member States on the way forward for enlargement, have taken precedence.

How are decisions made?

Enlargement decisions are made by unanimity in the European Council, but there are also important roles for the European Parliament and the European Commission:

- The Parliament must consent to each individual accession, while the Commission manages the accession negotiations on behalf of the Union.
- In practice, the Commission has long been the pre-eminent actor within the process, especially after taking on the responsibility for engaging with candidate countries from Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s.
- Member States have become more active at earlier stages of the accession negotiations, occasionally producing extra hurdles which candidate countries must clear in order to progress.

What are the conditions for membership to the EU?

Candidate countries must adhere to the criteria for accession, which are commonly referred to as the ‘Copenhagen criteria’:

- Stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- A functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU;
- The ability to take on and implement effectively the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.¹

¹ Figure 1: History of EU Enlargement from 6 to 28 Member States. Source: The European Commission.
Who are the potential candidate countries?

The EU has opened negotiations with Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey. In reality, negotiations with Turkey have been moribund for many years, as Turkey has regressed more and more from EU norms. Negotiations with the Western Balkan states have also proved difficult but have gained some momentum with the resolution of the ‘Macedonian name issue’.2

What are the arguments in favour of further enlargement?

The most important arguments for enlargement to the Western Balkans revolve around geography, security and stability. Following Croatia’s accession to the EU in 2013, the EU geographically surrounds the Western Balkans. The malleability of borders in Europe means there are direct security consequences flowing from this geographic reality. The flow of illicit goods including cigarettes, hard drugs, arms and organised crime into the EU has most often been through the ‘Balkan route’.

The increased influence of Russia in the region is a threat to EU energy security in particular. Some argue that the absorption of Western Balkan states into EU structures would help reduce security problems and help the EU deal more effectively with broader issues in a collective rather than piecemeal manner.

Is further enlargement a “win-win” for the EU?

Valuable market opportunities await EU companies that choose to locate in the Western Balkans as economic integration picks up pace. This should constitute a “win-win” for both the EU and Western Balkan states. Increased investment underpinned by EU aid for accession-related reforms should facilitate deeper economic convergence, boost incomes and general welfare across the board, and could bring mutually beneficial trade gains as the Western Balkans gradually become incorporated into the Single Market.

Are the Western Balkans part of the European family?

The EU has a historical responsibility towards this fragile part of the continent. Just as the countries of Central and Eastern Europe insisted after 1989 that they had a right to ‘return to Europe’, Western Balkan states insist they have every right to ‘join the club’. Western Balkan states are culturally and historically part of the ‘European family of nations’ and insist they have every right to participate in the European integration process.

From an EU perspective, the argument is about righting historical wrongs and staying true to the understanding of EU membership. What is more, the EU made a firm promise to the Western Balkan states at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003 that those countries that wished to join would become members of the EU.

What is the current state of play?

EU enlargement negotiations with Western Balkan states (led by the European Commission) have accelerated in recent months. Many Member States are, however, uneasy about the prospect of up to 6 more small states joining the EU. Ireland has continued to be supportive of further enlargement but other Member States, such as France and the Netherlands, are more hesitant. Indeed, a protracted mood of ‘enlargement fatigue’ was encapsulated in President Macron’s insistence in 2018 that no further accessions should take place for some time. While negotiations with Western Balkan states will continue, it is unlikely that any of the Western Balkan states will become members of the EU before 2025 at the earliest.

If you have a topic you would like us to address in this series please email FutureofEurope@iiea.com

Endnotes

2. For more information, please see the IIEA’s explainer on the Macedonian Name Question here.