

EU ENLARGEMENT: CURRENT EU CANDIDATES AND PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE ENLARGEMENT

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Abstract

European Union (EU) since its foundation until today has proven that is a regional international organization in the above expansion, from 6 to 28 members and is still continuing to expand. Since the expansion is one of the important policies, and placed high on the agenda of EU activities, I think it is important that should be analyzed this problem with scientific attention for two main reasons: first, the expansion of the EU led to many European countries with a communist past to be transformed into democratic societies and free market economies; second, enlargement has improved respect for democracy, rule of law, stability and security across Europe. The purpose of this paper is to analyze enlargement process, conditionality, and “the Copenhagen criteria”, related to the EU enlargement. It will also describe the situation in the candidate countries for EU membership and potential candidates, their perspectives and political circumstances that hinder their EU membership. Finally, a survey was conducted with Macedonian citizens about their country's prospects in the EU accession process, where their beliefs are analyzed and conclusions are drawn on the possible expansion of the EU towards their country.

Keywords: Enlargement, European Union, Candidate-Countries

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the future enlargement of the European Union southeastwards, and the opportunities and challenges that this will bring about. We will focus on the political dimension of this process, particularly in meeting the Copenhagen criteria.

For a long time, the expansion is understood only as an economic association that focuses on the economic costs and benefits of enlargement. However, this finding is not considered to be

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accurate as at the end of that expansion should be understood as a political process that is as a result of many factors, not just economic interests. EU enlargement is also very much a political process; most all significant steps on the path to accession require the unanimous agreement of the existing member states. As such, a prospective EU candidate's relationship or conflicts with individual member states may also influence a country's EU accession prospects and timeline.

Within the paper will analyze the process of enlargement, conditionality and progress of candidate countries for membership.

2. ENLARGEMENT PROCESS, CONDITIONALITY AND THE COPENHAGEN CRITERIA

The EU has long viewed the enlargement process as an extraordinary opportunity to promote political stability and economic prosperity in Europe.

The process of enlargement is one of the EU's most powerful policy tools and over the years it has helped transform many European states into functioning democracies and more prosperous countries.

The enlargement of the EU is a key political process both for the organization itself and the international relations of Europe in general (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2002: 500–528)

'Europe' has increasingly come to be defined in terms of the EU; the 'Europeanization' or 'Europeanness' of individual countries has come to be measured by the intensity of institutional relations with the Community and by the adoption of its organizational norms and rules. (Katzenstein, 1997: 251–304)

Conditionality is widely applied to the applicant countries by the EU during its Eastern Enlargement. It has played a very important role in enhancing the democratic reform, market economy, legal and law constructions of the applicant countries, thus making those countries reaching EU standards, and being accepted by the EU (Zuokui, 2010: 1)

EU conditionality in the Balkans is a multi-dimensional instrument geared towards reconciliation, reconstruction and reform.

The EU made the positive conditionality which mainly included the Stabilization and Association Process, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe and other instruments through which the EU made the annual progress report about the concrete economic integration, political cohesion and reform, and gave some relevant supports and assistances. Positive conditionality was focused instead on the Copenhagen criteria (Tocci, 2007: 167).

The technical nature of EU conditionality is mainly in reference to the obligations embedded in the adoption of the *acquis communautaire* (Noutcheva, 2006: 8). When negotiated with the Western Balkan countries on the accession, the EU was always insisting the objectivity of the conditionality equal to all applicants (Tocci, 2007).

According to the Maastricht Treaty (art.49) any European country may apply for EU membership if it meets a set of core political and economic criteria, known as the “Copenhagen criteria.” These criteria for EU membership require candidates to achieve “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy, as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union; the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union (EC Conclusions, 1993). These conditional rules were introduced as a result of the need to motivate less by short term economic gain than by the desire to support the ongoing reforms, transmit the European values of democracy and human rights, and to ensure a peaceful and stable development throughout a larger Europe. Thus, the decision was in true keeping with the original objectives of the founders of the European Community. The unprecedented enlargement of the EU with a large number of countries having very different political and economic starting points demanded a more principled approach (Wammen, 2013: 5).

In addition to meeting these criteria, practices testified that the EU enlargement is also very much a political process; most all significant steps on the path to accession require the unanimous agreement of the existing member states. As such, a prospective EU candidate’s relationship or conflicts with individual member states may also influence a country’s EU accession prospects and timeline (Archick, 2012: 2-4).

EU officials increasingly stress that the process of enlargement must take into account the Union’s integration capacity. In other words, acceding countries must be ready and able to fully assume the obligations of EU membership and additional EU enlargement must not endanger the ability of the EU’s institutions to function effectively or render EU financing arrangements unsustainable (EC Conclusions, 2006).

For many years, the EU has officially considered all the countries of the western Balkans as potential future candidates. The EU’s Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) is the framework for the EU’s relations with the countries of the Western Balkans. The centerpiece of the SAP is the conclusion of a SAA, which represents the contractual relationship between the EU and each western Balkans country; the SAA also sets out EU financial and technical assistance aimed at helping each country meet the EU’s membership criteria. Many view the SAA as the first step toward EU membership for the countries of the western Balkans (EC Enlargement Strategy, 2011).

Because the Western Balkan region’s political and institutional shortcomings are acute, the process of building viable democratic states with robust economies will remain a major challenge. The Western Balkan states are at widely different stage in the EU accession negotiations and thus there is no establish timeline to enter the EU.

3. CURRENT EU CANDIDATES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES OF EU ENLARGEMENT

Five countries are currently recognized by the EU as official candidates for membership: Montenegro; Iceland; Macedonia; Serbia and Turkey. All are at different stages of the accession process and face various issues and challenges on the road to EU membership. While, as potential candidates are: Albania; Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Table 1. The current situation regarding the process of EU enlargement

State	Current status	SSA	Applied for membership	Opening of negotiation
Albania	Potential candidate	12-06-2006	01-04-2009	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Potential candidate	16-06-2008		
Iceland	Candidate country		16-07-2009	17-06-2010
Kosovo	Potential candidate			
Macedonia	Candidate country	09-04-2001	22-03-2009	
Montenegro	Candidate country	15-10-2007	15-12-2008	29-06-2012
Serbia	Candidate country	29-04-2008	22-12-2009	01-10-2005
Turkey	Candidate country		01-04-1987 (EEC)	

Source: http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/countries/check-current-status/index_en.htm

Every year the European Commission adopts an annual strategy document explaining its policy on EU enlargement as well as progress reports on the political and economic developments in candidate countries/potential candidates. Latter reports provide an assessment on:

- How far candidate countries have implemented EU legislation;
- How far potential candidates have adopted EU standards and fulfilled other specific conditions.

3.1 The main challenges to candidate countries for EU membership and potential candidates (EC Communication, 2012: 12-19)

- **Montenegro:** On 29 June 2012, the European Council endorsed the decision of the Council, based on a Commission report, to open accession negotiations with Montenegro.

The opening of accession negotiations reflected Montenegro's continued progress on key reforms. Assessment of the European Commission is that Montenegro sufficiently meets the political criteria, in particular been marked improvements in strengthening the functioning of the parliament, the judiciary, anti-corruption policy, human rights and protection of minorities and also public administration reforms have further advanced. Montenegro has continued to play a constructive role in the region and to respect its international commitments. More attention should be devoted to implementation of reforms in the rule of law, in particular with respect to organized crime and corruption cases, and also needs to complete the process of constitutional change in order to safeguard the independence of the judiciary, etc.

- **Macedonia:** The Republic of Macedonia was granted candidate status in 2005. In 2009, the Commission assessed that the country sufficiently met the political criteria and recommended the opening of negotiations. The country continues to sufficiently meet the political criteria. The High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) with the Commission served as a catalyst for accelerating reforms and has contributed to substantial progress in a number of key policy areas. The reform momentum needs to be sustained in all areas of the political criteria in particular to ensure implementation. In particular, the rule of law, including as regards freedom of expression, inter-ethnic relations and reconciliation, needs to be strengthened. The European Commission estimates that Macedonia should find solution with Greece over the name issue, while all activities which have a negative impact on this issue should be avoided.
- **Serbia:** The European Council of March 2012 granted Serbia the status of candidate country. Serbia maintained full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Serbia is implementing smoothly its obligations under the Stabilization and Association Agreement. The European Commission welcomes the achievement of political agreement with Kosovo, while estimates that further steps should be taken in its implementation, as a condition for advancement towards EU membership. The status of Kosovo will remain the point of friction between Serbia and the EU. "...Serbia will need to either recognize or at least should implement the agreement reached (reached with the mediation of the EU) with Kosovo before it can join the EU. That this issue is of core importance, not only when it comes to the question of eventual Serbian membership in the EU but during the accession negotiations as well..." (Keil, 2011).

Serbia needs however to pay particular attention to the rule of law, notably the judiciary where recent setbacks underline the need for renewed commitment to pursue reforms, and ensure its independence, impartiality and efficiency, also taking into account the recent rulings of the Constitutional Court and the need to restore the confidence of citizens following the shortcomings in the judicial reappointment process. Also in light of recent events, special attention must be paid to the rights of vulnerable groups and to the independence of key institutions such as the Central bank. Serbia should also continue to

constructively engage in regional cooperation and strengthen relations with neighboring countries.

- **Albania:** Overall, Albania has continued to implement the Stabilization and Association Agreement smoothly and to play a constructive role in the region. Albania is well on its way towards meeting the two key priorities regarding public administration reform, good coordination of the EU integration process by government and effective cooperation by the opposition allowed moderate progress on the key priorities covering justice reform and the fight against corruption. Albania needs to build on progress achieved and take concrete steps to accelerate the fight against corruption and the reform of the judiciary in order to ensure its independence, efficiency and accountability. Further attention is needed to implement commitments in the area of human rights including the living conditions of the Roma community. Continuing political dialogue on reform remains necessary in view of ensuring the smooth functioning and further strengthening of the country's democratic institutions.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Bosnia and Herzegovina has made limited progress towards meeting the political criteria. There has been little progress in achieving more functional, coordinated and sustainable institutional structures. Substantial efforts are needed to reinforce the justice sector, in the fight against corruption and organized crime and in pursuing public administration reform. A shared vision among the political representatives on the overall direction and future of the country and its institutional set-up for a qualitative step forward on the country's EU path remains absent. The need for an effective coordination mechanism between various levels of government for the transposition, implementation and enforcement of EU laws remains to be addressed as a matter of priority so that the country can speak with one voice on EU matters and make effective use of the EU's pre-accession assistance.
- **Turkey:** Turkey is a key country for the EU, considering its dynamic economy, its strategic location and its important regional role which contribute to the EU's foreign policy and energy security. The EU remains the key anchor for Turkey's economic and political modernization. The accession process remains the most suitable framework for promoting EU-related reforms, developing dialogue on foreign and security policy issues, strengthening economic competitiveness and increasing cooperation in the field of energy and justice and home affairs. This process must respect the EU's commitments and the established conditionality. In this context, a positive agenda in the relations with Turkey was launched by the Commission in May 2012 to revive the accession process after a period of stagnation and bring fresh dynamism to the EU-Turkey relations. Concerns are growing regarding Turkey's lack of substantial progress towards fully meeting the political criteria. The situation regarding the respect of fundamental rights on the ground continues to be the source of serious preoccupation – despite recent improvements to various legal provisions in this area. There are recurring infringements of the right to liberty and security and to a fair trial, as well as of the freedom of expression, assembly

and association, through the disproportionate application of the legislation on terrorism and organized crime. In addition, the Kurdish issue remains a key challenge for Turkey's democracy and a political solution is urgently required. Overall, Turkey still needs to devote significant further efforts to reach the highest standards of democracy and human rights. Turkey needs to step up efforts to solve open bilateral issues, including border disputes, with its neighbors. A substantial number of formal complaints about violations of territorial waters and airspace by Turkey were made by Greece and Cyprus.

- **Iceland:** Accession negotiations with Iceland are progressing well, with an overall good level of alignment with the EU acquis, due to membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) and full participation in Schengen since 2001. More than half of the negotiating chapters have now been opened out of which 10 have been provisionally closed. Iceland continues to meet the political criteria. It is a well-functioning democracy with strong institutions and deeply rooted traditions of representative democracy. The country's judicial system is of a high standard, and Iceland ensures the continuous strengthening of its already high level of protection on fundamental rights. Following a deep and long recession, economic recovery has taken hold with good growth in 2011-12 and improvements of its macro-economic conditions. Overall, Iceland's track record in implementing its EEA obligations remains largely satisfactory. Some shortfalls are to be noted in areas such as financial services, food safety and free movement of capital. Temporary restrictions to free capital movements adopted in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis remain in place.

4. SURVEY

For purposes of this paper, in May-July 2013 was made a survey of citizens in Macedonia, which included questions that citizens have expressed their stance over the negotiation with the EU. Citizens have answered 3 questions, in which they express their opinions about the questions posed on this issue. In order to see how this topic is important, we carried out a Questionnaire with 1.113 citizens in Macedonia. Throughout selection of respondents, the demographic, ethnic, gender and geographic characteristics of the country have been respected.

Table 2. The citizens' opinion

Question	Answer		
	Yes	No	No Answer
1. Does Macedonia has met the terms and conditions of the negotiation, as defined by the EU?	39%	59%	2%
2. Are you satisfied with the performance of the Government in terms of obtaining a date for the	35%	41%	24%

starting negotiations with the EU?			
3. Is there an impact the resolution of open issues with neighboring states on getting a date for the start of negotiations?	83%	16%	1%

5. CONCLUSION

Balkan countries are very slowly being fulfilled criteria for EU membership. Although different countries have specific problems, however, major problems remain the same - corruption, judicial system, human rights, economic situation– all of them are present almost in every European progress report.

The enlargement process has been instrumental in transforming unstable countries with weak democratic institutions, minority problems and border issues into stable, prosperous and peaceful democracies. Furthermore, enlargement provides a larger market and new opportunities for export and investment.

Today, the situation in the region has changed entirely. All of the countries in the Western Balkans have a European perspective and all are engaged in comprehensive reform efforts. Old conflicts between former adversaries are being overcome.

Integration within the EU seems to remain the main hope for the Balkan region to sustain long lasting political, security and economic stability.

By extending Europe's zone of peace, stability, democracy and prosperity, enlargement is providing benefits to the EU as a whole. It is making the EU not only bigger, but politically and economically better positioned to address global challenges. This effectiveness of the enlargement process is largely the result of its solid backbone: the Copenhagen criteria. They have stood the test of time and, through improved application, continue today to provide the framework, guidance and inspiration for the enlargement policy (Füle, 2013: 11).

An issue which is important to be analyzed in the framework of individual membership of the Western Balkan countries, is the possibility of blocking the process of further expansion to all states of the region. Thus, Slovenia blocked Croatia with regards to their border disputes. Greece still blocks Macedonia for its NATO accession with regards to the dispute about Macedonia's constitutional name. While in the future, this situation can be found in other Balkan countries due to historical circumstances, this thing that may encourages other problems related to security in the region.

If the EU does not find a mechanism that will be impossible to stop the process of accession of new states from their neighbors who are members of the EU, then it would be better all Balkan countries to be admitted to the EU in a package. Otherwise, it would endanger the stability of the Balkan region in general.

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