



LOOKING AT FURTHER ENLARGEMENTS OF THE EU?

Between 2004 and 2007, the European Union Member States increased from 15 to 27, with the major thrust being driven towards the eastern ex-Soviet bloc. Looking at a map of the European continent today makes one realize that the geographical extent of the Union has really grown, and while it still does not encompass the Baltic states, the uppermost Nordic region, the larger countries neighbouring Russia and Switzerland, it has really come a long way from the original six founding members in 1950. **By Julian Micallef.**

This gradual expansion has provided stability to a continent historically characterised by frequent wars among neighbouring countries and the 20th century division caused by the so-called Iron Curtain. It has also presented an incentive for legislative and institutional reforms and brought about a common market where trade, services, workers and capital can move easily from one country to another.

In recent weeks we have seen calls from Iceland encouraging its political class to move towards the EU by submitting a formal application for membership. There can be no doubt that such a stance has been adopted due to the negative impact that the current financial crisis has had on that country's economy. But even without such negative scenarios, other countries have also been striving to secure membership.

The three candidate countries, currently leading the race, are Turkey, Croatia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (whose name is currently in dispute). And there are other potential ones who are officially recognised as such as Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and the recently recognised Kosovo. Other hopefuls have also emerged in recent years: worthy of note are Ukraine and Georgia, although one must say that their prospects

look indeed distant. The same cannot be said of Iceland. Given its close integration with the Union, particularly through the European Economic Area, Olli Rehn (the Commissioner responsible for enlargement) had said that talks could be concluded within a year if the government wished to apply!

The European Commission has now adopted an enlargement strategy paper outlining the progress which has been attained so far, with both candidate and potential countries, also providing an overview of the Union's enlargement policy. As prospective members usually require a high-level of investment, a financial allocations framework has also been proposed for the period until 2011.

The December 2006 Summit of EU leaders had shown support for the enlargement policy. It has not however been decoupled from the need for internal reform, nor from a cautious approach to ensure that an enlargement can really be sustained. Shall the Union's size increase? South-East Europe continues to be a favoured region, but one has to wait and see. Rushing through the process is not an option.

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