

The EU expands to the east

Events: On 1 May 2004, the EU carried out an enlargement on a scale totally unprecedented in its history. Whereas previous enlargements had led, at most, to three new members joining, this enlargement involved ten new members, turning an EU of 15 states into one with 25 members. What was also notable was that, with the exception of Malta and Cyprus, these new members were former communist states of central and eastern Europe. Three of them – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – had been former Soviet republics, while the other five – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia – had been part of the Soviet bloc (in the Soviet era, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had formed a single country, Czechoslovakia, and Slovenia had been a republic of Yugoslavia). This process was taken further on 1 January 2007, when two other former Soviet bloc states, Bulgaria and Romania, joined. Croatia's accession in 2013 brought the membership of the EU to 28.

Significance: The EU's expansion into eastern Europe has been significant for a variety of reasons. In the first place, it had a profound impact on the geopolitical restructuring of Europe. It completed the process initiated by the collapse of communism through the Eastern European Revolutions of 1989–91, by bringing about the reunification of Europe after decades of division by the Iron Curtain. In so doing, EU membership played an important role in supporting the politico-economic transformation of eastern Europe. By fulfilling the 'Copenhagen criteria', established in 1993 for any new members of the EU, the accession states of central and eastern Europe demonstrated their support for democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities, whilst also committing themselves to market economics and accepting the established EU aims of political, economic and monetary union. After 2004–7, then, the spread of liberal democracy into eastern Europe became an unstoppable process. Second, eastward expansion also affected the balances within the EU and its general orientation. In particular, the EU has been less able to function as a 'West European club', dominated by the Franco-German axis and with large states generally able to push through their preferences. Instead, the voice of smaller states has greatly increased, meaning, in part, that the EU has placed greater emphasis on providing support for economic and social development. In some senses, the centre of gravity of the EU has shifted eastwards, as attention has been given to further eastward expansion, with Turkey, Macedonia,



Serbia and Croatia being amongst the countries interested in joining, and the relationship between the EU and Russia has become an issue of increasing importance.

Third, eastward expansion has had an effect on the economic performance of the EU. On the one hand, by increasing the population of the EU by 20 per cent, it has created a larger internal market, providing an economic boost for all member states, which will increase as new members become economically successful. On the other hand, large differences in living standards and economic performance between existing members (the EU-15) and the accession states, and the fact that the transition from central planning to market economics is still an ongoing process, have created economic challenges for the EU. For instance, eastward expansion only increased the EU's GDP by 5 per cent, and it placed considerable pressures on the EU-15, which have provided about 90 per cent of revenues for the EU as a whole since 2007. Finally, expansion has had a significant impact on the decision-making processes of the EU. Quite simply, the wider the range of national and political interests that have to be satisfied, the more difficult it is for the EU to make decisions and to pursue coherent strategies. For many, the widening of the EU has placed substantial restrictions on its deepening. This led to attempts to establish more streamlined, centralized decision-making processes through a proposed EU Constitution. Nevertheless, this proved to be impossible to introduce in a more decentralized and, in certain respects, more divided EU, the Constitutional Treaty being withdrawn after its rejection by the Netherlands and France, and replaced by the more modest Lisbon Treaty. Some therefore argue that expansion has rendered the original goal of 'an ever closer union' impossible.