

The 2015 Enlargement Package

What is New and How It Helps the Enlargement Countries?

The [Enlargement Package](#), annually issued by the European Commission and comprising a strategy for the EU enlargement, including a set of country reports, has been impatiently awaited this year due to the long-announced improvements compared to the previous years. This particularly concerns the new approach to assessments in country-specific progress reports, i.e. the introduction of a number of changes in the reporting style in order to increase quality, reliability and transparency of reports. The new approach in the annual country reports, along with five-tier assessment scales, is also intended to increase comparability between the countries as well as to provide the stakeholders with the possibility to scrutinise the process and the enlargement countries' progress towards the EU. It places emphasis on the state of play in countries regarding their preparedness for membership and provides guidance for what should be done so as to meet the accession requirements. Although this novelty brings greater clarity and understanding about what needs to be done by a candidate country, it is impossible to guess whether those recommendations represent a benchmark for the opening of a given negotiating chapter or merely a referral to the most relevant issue, which is to be dealt with in the following year. In other words, what is the connection between the Progress Reports' recommendations and the opening and other benchmarks?

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While on the one hand the Commission, apparently concerned with preserving or even strengthening the credibility of the enlargement, assures that the accession process is based on "strict but fair conditionality and the principle of own merits", on the other hand, it highlights the fact that none of the enlargement countries will be ready to join the EU before 2019. This explicit statement found in the Enlargement Strategy Paper (which, from this year on, represents a mid-term document covering the entire Commission's mandate) signals that the road for enlargement countries remains rocky and a lot remains to be done. The consequent question is how efficient is the Enlargement Package in intending to assist the countries on their path towards the EU? This CEP Insight gives a brief overview of the 2015 Enlargement Package and outlines the most important issues and concerns for the future.

What Does the Package Bring?

This year, the Commission has reaffirmed its focus on fundamental issues, referring to them as the "backbone of enlargement policy under this Commission." The areas which remain of crucial importance, identified as "indivisible and mutually reinforcing," are the rule of law (where all countries still face major challenges), fundamental rights (where freedom of expression and media are identified as particularly concerning, bearing in mind recent negative developments in certain countries), the strengthening of democratic institutions, including public administration reform (which is one of the cross-cutting issues) and, lastly, economic development and competitiveness (where the "Berlin Process" and the "Western Balkans Six" format are recognised as valuable tools for improving regional economic development and connectivity). It goes without saying that the listed "fundamentals" represent the core of the EU values and principles. However, despite the Commission's effort to encourage a more evidence-based approach in these areas, which is evident and highly appreciated, it has proved difficult to measure progress in these areas, as well as to offer a "role model" for the candidate countries, given the deteriorating state of respect for EU values in some Member States, which ultimately goes unpunished.

Furthermore, while the majority of challenges for the enlargement countries, pointed out in the current Strategy, are nothing new compared to the previous assessments, one cannot help but notice that this year's PRs and Enlargement Strategy have been marked by the refugee and

migrant influx issues. Regarding this issue, the Commission expressed an urgent need for increased cooperation with the countries within the enlargement process, and emphasised its proposal that the list of safe countries of origin should include all enlargement countries. Moreover, both the Enlargement Strategy and the PRs for the transiting countries (i.e. Serbia and Macedonia) mention the necessity for stronger regional cooperation on the issue and better preparedness for urgent responses to the expected mass influx. This implies that new membership conditions could be imposed on the candidate countries, although the current response and offered solutions to Europe's migration crisis are very difficult to link to the EU accession process of the candidate countries, as there is no *acquis* which could be unequivocally referred to. Overall, the new enlargement package is meant to introduce more clarity and fairness into the enlargement process, which is undoubtedly a commendable intention. However, it is hard to escape the impression that the unfolding circumstances related to the mass influx to Europe continue to question the credibility and consistency of the EU's enlargement policy.

What Next?

Even though the Enlargement Strategy Paper, from now on, represents a multi-annual document, the Commission is determined to continue issuing annual progress reports and providing additional recommendations. While the list of fundamental issues will remain intact, the Commission clearly stated that the new methodology merely represents a pilot approach and that further adjustments are likely in the forthcoming period, based on the potential lessons learned. Given the fact that CSOs in Serbia, which are highly involved in the monitoring of the negotiation process, have the capacity to observe the level of success of the explained Commission's new approach, and provide recommendations for its improvement, the possibility of assistance of the civil society representatives in this respect should be taken into consideration.

Moreover, the Enlargement Strategy announces that this year's reporting and assessment scales are more harmonised for the purpose of facilitating direct comparability between the states, thus ensuring an incentive for intensifying reforms. This rather courageous approach of the Commission has the potential to stimulate peer learning and positive peer-pressure among the enlargement countries, but also provide possibilities for civil society to launch different regional initiatives and conduct analyses that will consequently highlight the benchmarking approach and further strengthen such peer-pressure. In comparison to the "Big Bang" enlargement of 2004-2007 which was characterised by the "regatta approach" and countries trying hard to catch up with each other, one of the effects of the current enlargement policy is very low competitive spirit among the countries. The new Commission's approach promises to introduce some of the positive aspects of the former regatta principle into the present enlargement agenda, while preserving the "each country at its own merit" principle. In the context of developments in Serbia, with the expected opening of the supposedly most essential and at the same time most delicate chapters, it will be particularly significant to inspect what results the newly formed scaling and other novelties provide in practice, and how the mutual comparability contributes to stimulating Serbia's progress.

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