Enlargement: policies, criteria and EU's strategic interests

2012/2025(INI) - 22/11/2012 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 571 votes for, 34 against and 35 abstentions a resolution on the policies and criteria of enlargement and the EU’s strategic interests in the matter.

Parliament firstly points out that in accordance with Article 49 TEU, **any European state** which respects and remains committed to the promotion of the values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, **may apply to become a member of the Union**.

That is why, unlike the responsible Committee, Parliament does not propose to launch a debate on the introduction of a new category of associate member of the Union, reaffirming that EU membership provides stability in the swiftly changing international environment, and that belonging to the European Union continues to offer the perspective of social development and prosperity.

It also notes that each country aspiring to EU membership has to be judged on **its own merits** in fulfilling, implementing and complying with the same set of criteria.

It further notes that the Copenhagen criteria have been in place for almost twenty years and the moment has come for their re-evaluation.

At the same time it recalls that through its annual resolutions on the candidate and potential candidate countries, it contributes to improving the transparency and accountability of the enlargement process by echoing the opinions of the European citizens and following the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, its role has increased thanks to the recognition of co-legislative power, inter alia with regard to the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA).

General considerations: Parliament strongly supports the enlargement process and believes that enlargement needs to remain a credible policy, supported by the public both in the EU and in the candidate and potential candidate countries. In general, it considers that

the EU and the candidate and potential candidate countries must fulfill all obligations and create the conditions for ensuring the success of future enlargements, inter alia by assisting the countries concerned in their efforts to meet the criteria for EU accession.

Whilst it considers that the Copenhagen criteria continue to constitute a fundamental basis and should remain at the heart of enlargement policy, Parliament stresses that the **Union's integration capacity** must be taken fully into account. Parliament considers that the concept comprises four key elements:

- accession states should contribute to and not impair the ability of the Union to maintain momentum towards the fulfilment of its political objectives;

- the institutional framework of the Union should be able to deliver efficient and effective government;

- the financial resources of the Union should be sufficient to meet the challenges of economic and social cohesion and of the Union’s common policies;

- a comprehensive communication strategy should be in place to inform public opinion concerning the implications of enlargement.

Pointing out that the EU continues to be attractive with its combination of economic dynamism with a social model, Parliament regrets that this **social dimension has been largely neglected in the enlargement process**. It invites the Commission to address this issue, especially in the framework of Chapter 19 (Social Policy and Employment), to foster positive social transformation in the future EU Member States. It underlines the impact of the *acquis* in the social field and the commitments undertaken within the framework of the European Social Charter of 1961 and the Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers of 1989.

In order to facilitate alignment of the economies of accession countries in developing in the same direction as those of EU Member States, Parliament encourages the **formulation of feasible and country-specific targets** for each of the EU 2020 headline targets. It also stresses that, in order to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of the enlargement strategy, the **Copenhagen criteria must be fully respected and complied with** by Member States as well, in order to avoid requiring applicant countries to meet higher standards than those applying in some EU Member States. To this effect, Parliament stresses the importance of defining the different stages more clearly, **setting transparent and fair benchmarks** throughout the process that translate the general membership criteria into concrete steps towards accession. A benchmark, once attained, should be sustained and that **backsliding should elicit an appropriate response on the part of those setting the benchmarks**.

Stressing that the objective of the accession process is full EU membership, Parliament calls on the Commission to maintain and further intensify its **monitoring of progress in the accession process**, as well as its assistance to candidate and potential candidate countries, so as to ensure that they achieve a high degree of preparedness. Parliament also believes that the EU integration capacity of each candidate should be evaluated at an early stage (that is, in the Commission's "opinion" for each potential candidate state).

In this context, it emphasises that a successful enlargement process requires that the EU should **maintain the capacity to act and develop** with the financial resources to pursue its political objectives.

Enlargement policies: welcoming the new negotiating approach for future negotiating frameworks, which prioritises issues related to the judiciary and fundamental rights, as well as to justice and home affairs, Parliament calls on the Commission to report to Parliament regularly on progress in these areas. This focus on the areas in question should not be to the detriment of the efforts and progress made in the other areas.

On the question of policies to be put in place by the candidates, Parliament highlights the main following **priorities**:

- the building of an efficient, independent and impartial judicial system and a transparent democratic political system that can strengthen the rule of law;

- the fight against corruption and organised crime;

- visa liberalisation;

- greater participation by civil society, non-state actors and social partners within the framework of a continuous dialogue;

- the enhancing of administrative capacities and human resources in order to make them capable of transposing, implementing and enforcing the acquis;

- recognition of the important role of social dialogue within the enlargement process and the development of enforcement mechanisms (such as labour inspection so as to protect workers and ensure respect for their social rights);

- more support for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);

- the development of regional cooperation and **facilitating genuine and lasting reconciliation** (including the prosecution of war crimes, the peaceful coexistence of different ethnic, cultural and religious communities, and the protection of minorities);

- the strengthening of gender equality and anti-discrimination, including the rights of the LGBT community and the integration of minorities in political, social and economic life;

- putting in place the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies.

Other questions were raised such as **improving the quality of the accession process by making it more merit-based** and more transparent and benchmark-driven. From this perspective, Parliament recommends that the progress reports should be clearer in their assessments. The benchmarks should not set additional conditions for the candidate and potential candidate countries, but should translate the general membership criteria and the objectives of the EU's pre-accession assistance into concrete steps.

The question of conflicts and good neighbourhood relations: Parliament takes the view that any acceding state should **resolve its main bilateral problems and major disputes with neighbours**, particularly those concerning territorial issues, **before it can join the Union**. Therefore, it calls on the EU to support efforts to resolve outstanding disputes, including border disputes. All parties to disputes whose continuation is likely to impair implementation of the acquis should engage constructively in their peaceful resolution and, if necessary, refer the matter to the International Court of Justice. Parliament therefore calls on the EU to support efforts to resolve outstanding disputes, including border disputes. All peaceful resolution of disputes before accession should be conducted in a constructive manner and, if necessary, refered to the International Court of Justice. The resolution of these conflicts should not impair implementation of the acquis or endanger the preservation of international peace and security. In this context, the Commission and the Council are called upon to start developing, in accordance with the EU Treaties, **an arbitration mechanism** aimed at resolving bilateral and multilateral disputes.

Parliament welcomes initiatives such as the positive agenda on Turkey, the high-level accession dialogue with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and the structured dialogue on the rule of law with Kosovo and supports the aim of creating a fresh dynamic in the reform process, while stressing that these initiatives must in no way replace the formal negotiation procedures, but must be fully in line with the negotiating framework.

In this regard, Parliament considers it essential to take account of the EU's overall interests, its values, and the obligation to fully comply with the acquis and respect the principles on which the EU itself is founded.

The IPA and the question of financing accession: Parliament urges the Commission to plan **a non-decrease in real terms of overall funding for each beneficiary**. Parliament notes that this calculation should be made taking into consideration the following: a) the ratio of overall programmed IPA assistance to each country's GDP should not decrease in relative terms; b) the number of countries with access to

funding through the future instrument is likely to decrease with the accession of Croatia; c) with the suggested changes to the new Instrument serving to remove differentiation between countries on the basis of their candidacy status, more countries will be able to access funding.

For a concerted communication policy: Parliament takes the view that it is essential to accompany EU enlargement with a concerted communication policy, more effective and more transparent. In order to encourage **support among EU citizens** for further enlargement and the commitment of the citizens of the candidate and potential candidate countries to continuing with reforms, it is crucial to present clear and comprehensive information on the political, socioeconomic and cultural benefits of enlargement. It considers it essential, in particular, to explain to the public how enlargement has brought new investment and export opportunities, and how it can contribute to attaining the EU's objectives in terms of promoting conflict prevention, tackling the economic crisis, creating jobs, facilitating the free flow of labour, protecting the environment **while improving living conditions** as well as reducing social and economic imbalances.

Prospects and the EU's strategic interests: believing strongly that the EU can gain great strategic benefits through enlargement policy, Parliament remains fully committed to the prospect of enlargement.

Parliament recalls that the process is not concluded with the simple transposition of the acquis, and stress the importance of effective implementation. It considers that EU Member States should also be assessed for their continued compliance with the EU's fundamental values. Therefore, it calls on the Commission to work out a detailed proposal for a **monitoring mechanism**, building on the provisions of Article 7 TEU and Article 258 TFEU.

Noting that the global financial crisis and the difficulties of the eurozone, the Parliament underlines the importance of further **consolidating economic and financial stability** and fostering growth, also in the candidate and potential candidate countries so as to maintain sound public finances. It is therefore necessary to provide adequate and better-targeted pre-accession financial assistance. It notes the Commission's proposal for a new IPA, including increased financial support for the financial perspective 2014-2020. It also calls for closer examination of the use of **innovative financial instruments** requiring coordination structures, such as, for example, the Western Balkans Investment Framework, which is complementary to the administrative structures for the IPA and has the goal of attracting and channelling support for priority areas.

Lastly, Parliament emphasises the need to focus the process of enlargement on a model of sustainable economic growth in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy.