

The sixth enlargement

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_sixth_enlargement-en-ff37ff8a-acb6-4a11-9ba8-b3fd6d772a85.html

Last updated: 08/07/2016



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Following the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe soon expressed a wish to accede to the European Communities. In order to help them progress towards political democracy and a free market economy, the European Union concluded Association Agreements with each of them with a view to future accession.

Romania and Bulgaria signed, on 1 February and 8 March 1993 respectively, the Association Agreements that established the legal framework for their gradual integration into the European Union. These Agreements provided for, in particular, the gradual establishment of a free-trade area, the maintenance of regular political dialogue, approximation of legislation and economic, financial and cultural cooperation. The Agreements entered into force on 1 February 1995.

The Copenhagen European Council of 21 and 22 June 1993 laid down the criteria to be met by all the associated countries of Central and Eastern Europe in order for them to be able to accede to the European Union. In the following year, on 22 June and 14 December respectively, Romania and Bulgaria applied to accede to the European Union. However, both countries experienced major problems in putting in place the reforms needed to meet the Copenhagen criteria. The economic reforms undertaken were not sufficient to establish a competitive market economy, and the existing administrative structures did not allow for acceptance of the Community *acquis*.

In July 1997, the European Commission issued an initial negative opinion on the accession applications submitted by Bulgaria and Romania. In its view, the two countries were on the way to fulfilling the political criteria, and it emphasised the progress that they had made in order to fulfil the economic criteria. Nevertheless, the Commission deemed the reforms carried out to be insufficient and noted that both countries were experiencing serious problems in transposing the Community *acquis* into national law. Accordingly, it concluded that accession negotiations should be begun once the two countries had made sufficient progress towards fulfilling the conditions for accession. Consequently, when the Luxembourg European Council met on 12 and 13 December 1997, Bulgaria and Romania were not part of the first group of countries with which accession negotiations were to begin in 1998.

In late 1996, political changes in Romania and Bulgaria resulted in a gradual improvement in the situation. In Bulgaria, the coming to power of President Stoyanov soon gave rise to a new policy of reforms aimed at ensuring political stability for the country and at preparing it for accession to the European Union. In Romania, the new President, Emil Constantinescu, also implemented a policy of change and declared that accession to the European Union was a political priority.

These new reforms were recognised and supported by the European Union. In its Monitoring Report published in October 1999, the Commission finally recommended the opening of accession negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania. The Helsinki European Council of 10 and 11 December accepted this recommendation and decided to organise, in February 2000, bilateral intergovernmental conferences with a view to opening with each applicant country negotiations on the terms for their accession to the European Union. In addition to Romania and Bulgaria, the Helsinki group comprised Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Slovakia.

However, the accession negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania did not progress at the same rate as those with the other acceding countries. The delay in the progress of the negotiations resulted, in particular, from the problems that the two countries were experiencing in creating the administrative and legal systems required to transpose the *acquis* into national law and to bring the requisite economic reforms to a successful conclusion. The Copenhagen European Council of 12 and 13 December 2002 finally concluded negotiations with 10 countries applying to accede to the European Union and fixed the date for their accession at 1 May 2004. In the case of Bulgaria and Romania, the European Council followed the road map drawn up by the Commission in October in agreement with the two countries and set itself the objective of welcoming them as Member States in 2007.

Meanwhile, Romania and Bulgaria were gradually getting closer to the European Union. For example, between February 2002 and June 2003, the two countries were already participating in the work of the European Convention, and, in 2003, they established Permanent Representations to the European Union in Brussels. The accession negotiations with Bulgaria were finally concluded in June 2004, while those with Romania ended six months later. On 22 February 2005, the European Commission issued a favourable opinion on the applications submitted by Bulgaria and Romania for accession to the European Union. This opinion was supported by the European Parliament on 13 April. On 25 April, the Council of the European Union accepted the two countries' applications for accession and, on the same day, the representatives of Bulgaria and Romania signed the Treaty of Accession to the European Union in Luxembourg. However, the Treaty included a number of safeguard clauses providing, in particular, for a one-year delay in accession if the requisite commitment to the reforms was not demonstrated and if the countries were not in a position to fulfil the conditions for accession. In the case of some sectors, the safeguard clauses remained applicable after the two countries had actually acceded.

Accordingly, the Commission's Monitoring Reports assumed crucial importance. Particular attention was paid to combating corruption, to ensuring the independence of the judicial system, to combating organised crime, to respect for human rights and to protecting minorities, as well as to food safety. On 26 September 2006, the Commission published its final Monitoring Report on the state of preparedness for accession in Bulgaria and Romania. Although the Commission listed a number of areas that continued to pose problems, it concluded that Bulgaria and Romania were in a position to assume the rights and obligations associated with their accession as of 1 January 2007. The Commission therefore allowed the two countries to continue the reforms required within the European Union and, in so doing, avoided the threat of uncertainty that could have ensued from a further postponement of their accession. Following Council approval on 17 October 2006, the accession of Bulgaria and Romania came into effect on 1 January 2007. These accessions, which brought the number of European Union Member States to 27, completed the process of accession of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, thereby putting an end to the division of the continent of Europe.