

Commentary

Yes, but there are also questions surrounding an EU of 36 countries

European governments are guardedly silent on the question of the Union's next enlargement. And surprisingly this sensitive issue hasn't surfaced in the French presidential election. Meanwhile, Croatia is preparing itself for entry in mid-2013. Iceland and Turkey are pursuing accession without any target dates in sight. Serbia is happy with its newly-acquired candidate status, and could yet become a cornerstone for stabilising the five smaller Western Balkan states.

Enlargement is an effective soft power tool for the EU. But for all its advantages, some key problems need to be addressed. A wider EU with 28 members once Croatia joins is going to mean more sub-divisions or coalitions; North and South, old and new; big and small, coastal and land-locked, countries more exposed to illegal immigration, and net contributors to the EU budget and its beneficiaries. Such coalitions are being formed every day.

Politics based on different levels of economic development are more stable, and will determine bargains surrounding the EU's long-term 2014-2020 budget. Before the "big bang" enlargements of 2004 and 2007, member states divided into two categories, the Union's developed centre and its semi-periphery, with EU regional policy the chief instrument for closing the gap. Now, with its new central and eastern European members,

the EU has had to import a hitherto unknown kind of economic development policy because the Union has real peripheries at its eastern end. And that's going to mean more differentiation in the EU's policies and implementing measures.

The institutional consequences of enlargement to 27 states are already overloading the EU's decision-making mechanisms. And now any further expansion of the EU would target the south eastern Balkans region and beyond. That would raise problems of size; Turkey is a major player on the world scene and a G20 member whose rapidly growing population is approaching that of Germany. Turkish accession would change the balance of power among the "big" EU member states. As to the western Balkans, the entry of six countries there would increase the number of small EU members with rights equal to those of the larger countries. And an EU of perhaps 36 member states would go beyond the double majority voting system suggested by the European Convention back in 2004 and which is due to be introduced by 2014. In other words, the weighting of votes in relation to the number of countries and their citizens should be complemented by other criteria, possibly an EU member state's net contribution to the European budget.



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