

The European Union will be enlarged from 15 to 25 member countries. Another two might join in 2007. Should this be the end of enlargement?

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The European Union has been growing in size ever since its creation after the Second World War. It began as a post-war initiative between six countries pooling control over coal and steel to guarantee a more peaceful future for Europe. It now includes 15 member countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom), has its own currency and has a lot of political power in global affairs. Plans have been made for a further enlargement of the Union to 25 member countries (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), while negotiations are continuing about the accession of Bulgaria and Romania. Although there are many people who argue for further enlargement, stating that this would increase stability in Europe, others argue that this should be the end of enlargement, mainly due to the disastrous economic consequences that further enlargement could bring about. It is necessary to look at both sides of the argument to decide whether the advantages of further enlargement outweigh the negative consequences it could provoke.

On the one hand, it could be argued that enlargement could benefit European security. By extending the zone of stability and prosperity to Eastern Europe, the European Union could prevent the spread of extremism which is usually caused by instability. As proof, we can look at the social havoc taking place in Eastern Europe after the Second World War, and the rise in extremism, especially communism, that followed. Thus, by offering financial aid, the European Union could protect itself from another spread of extremism. The addition of millions of people in a rapidly growing economy would boost the European Union's market as there would be more consumers as well as more workers. This would help to develop the economy. There would also be benefits for countries wanting to join the EU. First of all, the European Union offers a single set of trade rules and a single tariff, which would greatly benefit investment and trade in those countries. Secondly, the imposition of Human Rights laws would mean that citizens of those countries would have greater protection and a generally better standard of living. Citizens of existing member countries of the European Union would enjoy a better environment due to environmental laws imposed on nearby accession countries. As well as that, the enlarged European Union would become stronger in its fight against crime and illegal immigration as there would be greater aid from new member countries. As far as politics are concerned, further enlargement could strengthen its role in foreign affairs, security policy, trade policy and other fields of global governance.

Having said that, there are also disadvantages to further enlargement. Firstly, the accession of new member countries would increase the budgetary contributions of existing countries. This would be used to stabilise the economies of future member

countries to fit to European Union standards. The great majority of countries likely to be brought into the EU by enlargement are below the poverty level. For example, Poland has a GDP per head that is less than half of the current European Union average. Secondly, there is a possibility of what is called social dumping. This means that workers from poorer accession countries would migrate to the West in search of employment. Unemployment in accession countries and countries wanting to join the European Union is already higher than the unemployment rate in countries which are part of the European Union. This could off-set unemployment in future accession countries, as well as increase social tension in existing member countries where native workers could find themselves replaced by workers from new member countries. The unemployment rate and overall difference in wealth could widen the gap between higher income member countries and poorer countries. This would mean that the European Union would have to provide financial aid to poorer countries, thus increasing the funding budget which would have a negative economic effect on member countries. To pay for this financial aid, taxation would have to increase which would probably anger citizens of existing member countries. If, however, the European Union did not enlarge, the money that would have gone to help struggling member countries could be used to strengthen the economy of the European Union, thus making it more effective as a system for existing member countries. Moreover, the enlargement could provoke a power redistribution as existing member countries could lose funding and votes to new member countries. Therefore, from a political perspective, the European Union could actually become weaker. Decision making would become slower as there would be so many countries that would have to agree. This would make the European Union less effective. As well as that, crime could become harder to control with so little internal boundaries. Criminals would be able to travel easier from country to country. Socially, it could be argued that the differences in culture of the different member countries could provoke social tension. The cultures of different countries would mix, thus dissolving each country's own culture.

Overall, although there are many advantages to further enlargement, the possible consequences that this enlargement could bring outweigh them. The larger the Union becomes, the less power it will have as there would be such a great number of factors that would need to be addressed, such as financial aid. Negotiations would be slow and ineffective as more member countries would provoke more disagreements. The enlargement would have a particularly negative effect on existing member countries, who would have to increase their taxations in order to help new member countries. Citizens should also be put into account and from a recent survey conducted in the United Kingdom, a member country, most people are negative in their responses whether the European Union should be further enlarged. Many people argue that Europe would lose its identity if its culture becomes so intermixed with other cultures. Therefore, the European Union should think very carefully about enlargement and its consequences in order to avoid it becoming ineffective as a system.

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