

DRAFT BENELUX POSITION ON ENLARGEMENT

The enlargement of the European Union has proved a historic opportunity to ensure the extension of the area of peace, stability and prosperity on the European continent. The Benelux countries always considered that deepening is indispensable for a successful European integration when enlarging. This approach was and remains at the heart of their contributions, especially when dealing with Treaty reform. The accession instrument is of a particular nature in the sense that it combines both the external strategic interest of the EU and its internal development.

Five enlargements have occurred over the last nearly 50 years. Since its foundation, the EC and then the EU have successfully extended its sphere of shared responsibilities, values and solidarities.

Future enlargements will also have to be seen along these lines. Each acceding country must be in a position to join the EU in these responsibilities, values and solidarities. This implies an adequate and thorough process of preparation before accession. The Copenhagen European Council of June 1993 and the Madrid European Council of December 1995<sup>1</sup> have defined the conditions of this process, which remain fully applicable, but need to be further clarified.

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<sup>1</sup> COPENHAGEN EUROPEAN COUNCIL

“Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union. Membership presupposes the candidate's ability to take on the obligations of membership including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

The Union's capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration, is also an important consideration in the general interest of both the Union and the candidate countries.”

MADRID EUROPEAN COUNCIL

“Membership criteria also require that the candidate country must have created the conditions for its integration through the adjustment of its administrative structures.”

The Benelux countries respect all existing commitments regarding the candidate countries and countries of the Western Balkans and expect these countries to fulfill the necessary criteria in the course of the accession process.

The member states and the Commission have committed themselves in December 2005 to have an in-depth discussion on the enlargement process in 2006 on the basis of the enlargement strategy paper 2005 of the European Commission. This discussion was initiated under the Austrian Presidency of the EU. This discussion should continue and focus, among other things, on additional proposals to further improve the quality of the enlargement process and to specify the concept of the absorption capacity of the EU. The European Council of June 2006 should now invite the Commission to come forward with proposals to improve the quality of the enlargement process, building on the enlargement strategy paper 2005 and taking into account contributions by Member States. This discussion should lead to Council conclusions under the Finnish Presidency and constitute the core of the framework for further enlargement.

Benelux Proposals to further improve the quality of the enlargement process:

- The EU should consider applications for membership only after the country concerned implements properly the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and has addressed the EU's short-term priorities as formulated in the European Partnership with that country.
- The option of calling a candidate country to account for failing to meet the political criteria must be kept open throughout the process of accession negotiations.
- For accession negotiations, as agreed by the European Council in the December 2004, the Council, acting by unanimity on a proposal by the Commission, will lay down relevant and proportionate benchmarks for the provisional closure and, where appropriate, for the opening of each chapter.
- Moreover, the Commission should open difficult chapters early in the process, to avoid having to reach decisions on these important matters under time pressure

Any decision-making on enlargement must be clearly marked as such and communicated to the public to increase transparency and thus ascertain maximum support for this policy.

#### Absorption capacity

The Union's capacity to absorb new members constitutes an essential element in the enlargement process in the years to come, both in order to maintain the momentum towards deeper European integration and to ensure the support of the European citizens. As the Heads of State and Government stated so pertinently in 1993 in Copenhagen, taking into account the absorption capacity of the EU is in the interest of the Union and of the candidate countries. The need to safeguard the Union's ability to function and to further develop must be one of the key considerations to guide our internal evaluation during the enlargement process.

Regarding absorption capacity, the Benelux countries request from the Commission, in view of further discussions under Finnish Presidency, to provide in its special report a general analysis of the impact of further enlargement on the capacity of the Union to maintain the momentum of European integration, notably the impact on EU policy, the Union's decision-making capacity and the EU budget.

With these elements at their disposal, governments will be better able to assess the overall implications of further enlargement for both the Union and the candidate countries, and thus be able to contribute to better understanding of the enlargement process which is a precondition for support by citizens in EU member states.

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