



Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Record of roundtable discussion on EU Enlargement in Belgrade, 3 May 2014

On 3 May 2014 the British Embassy in Belgrade hosted a roundtable discussion on EU enlargement. It was attended by representatives from the Serbian European Integration Office, the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the EU Integration Committee in the Serbian Parliament.

How effective have conditionality and EU assistance programmes been in promoting progress by enlargement countries?

1. Participants drew a distinction between technical and political conditionality, and saw failures for both, giving as examples the accession process for Greece, Romania and Bulgaria.
2. One participant thought that conditionality had to be reform-driven to be effective. Experience had shown that we had tackled challenges in the right way when we had had clear and measurable conditions. It was most effective when linked to the Acquis, and to areas of sole EU competence. Greyer areas of mixed competence were more difficult, and making bilateral issues part of accession conditionality was unhelpful.
3. Another participant said that the EU needed to be able to set out what reform was necessary and have at least an idea of a road map of how to get there. (Schengen) visa liberalisation was a good example of conditionality working in this sense.
4. One participant said that there were two types of political conditionality: one coming from Brussels and another from individual member states (he gave an example of Romanian claims regarding the Vlach community). This combination risked becoming impossible for future members.
5. The same participant added that new conditions seemed to be added every day. He thought that the next set of new conditions for Serbia would be related to

Bosnia/Herzegovina. This damaged the predictability of the process and the overall impression of enlargement.

6. Another summed this up by saying that what they thought they needed was a conditionality road map.

How well have the Member States and EU institutions run the enlargement process?

Have lessons from previous enlargements been correctly learned?

7. There was an issue on presentation and focus, which seemed not to be right for Serbia.
8. One participant said that in Serbia's EU accession process so far, dedicated attention and importance attributed by the EU has been divided unevenly, broadly one third of the process was related to Kosovo, one third to issues around the judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapters 23 and 24), and only one third to the rest of the Acquis. That final third was by far the biggest, most difficult and most investment intensive. That was not right.
9. The balance for involvement of civil society and parliament in the negotiation process was still evolving, but there was general agreement that there needed to be a mechanism to involve a diverse group of interests and views, and that the Serbian parliament had an important role in adding scrutiny and democratic accountability to the process.
10. When challenged directly on whether conditionality and the process as it currently existed was working, there was a consensus that it was. At times it was unwelcome, but in Serbia's case tough conditionality worked. The EU served as a catalyst for change and the enlargement process was of immense importance for reform. One participant thought that Serbia would pursue reform anyway, but some institutions in Serbia, for example, such as the Ombudsman, would not exist without EU pressure and IPA assistance. One participant stressed the importance of the need for the accession country to be treated as a partner in the accession process – it was not clear that this lesson had been learned. Partnership was just as important as conditionality, and if not handled properly, the tone of the relationship could be counter-productive in the longer term. That was particularly true if new elements were added.

11. One participant thought that the right lesson had been learned on the need for sound economic governance. But he now felt that Serbia was being asked to comply with 'Copenhagen "+ + +" Criteria'.
12. Another participant described a need for respect in the process. Current issues in the EU demonstrated the need to ensure that the people of the accession country felt respected and had an incentive to support or even pressure their government into making difficult decisions. This wasn't currently working.
13. One participant raised the question of common values. He thought that values were not now common in the way they were at the beginning of the EU project. There was a risk of a clash. We should continue to reflect on this.
14. But he went on to say that a pragmatic assessment of the importance of the EU meant that there was a greater support for the reform process necessary to join the EU (68%) than there was for the EU itself (nearer 50%). He thought that a high percentage of the reform would be carried out regardless, but that the accession negotiations provided a catalyst, focus, and financial support.
15. One participant saw IPA as a key tool in driving reform. Used correctly it was a game changer, and the EU was getting better at using it. It accelerated existing work and supported areas which would otherwise be left untouched.
16. However, one common theme which came up in discussion was that the EU and the individual members states were poor at communicating the process, the benefits, and what the EU was doing in a given area. This was essential if, along with domestic institutions, they were to secure buy in for membership.

What impact has enlargement had on the UK and wider EU interests?

17. One participant commented that enlargement was a win-win for EU member states. The significant increase of UK exports to new member states, after the 2004 enlargement cycle was a perfect example.

What future challenges will the enlargement process face?

18. Two views were expressed on the idea of the EU's soft power.

19. Firstly that it risked reaching a stage where the EU path was seen as a coercive one: Serbia risked finding itself surrounded by EU members, with the EU making up the vast majority of its trade and investment. That added up to a conclusion that Serbia had no option but to pursue the EU path.
20. Secondly, one participant called for more of what he called smart power: not shying away from the harder push when necessary, but importantly, using the soft levers more effectively and visibly, and demonstrating a positive impact for ordinary citizens.
21. There was a shared view that one of the challenges for Serbia was to recover from the mistakes that had been made for previous enlargements. Serbia had to be better prepared for membership than Romania or Bulgaria. They saw how damaging that was, and Serbia would not want to be admitted under those circumstances.
22. There was also a view that the EU was entering the end game in terms of the enlargement process. One participant saw this as an historical mission for the Western Balkans. Though he thought that did not mean a big bang enlargement. It was important that the process should remain conditions based and objective.
23. A different participant thought that re-defining the EU's Eastern Partnership would be crucial for the enlargement process.
24. Another reiterated an objection to group-accession because the slowest country would set the pace for others. Romanian and Bulgarian EU accession was different than Croatian and Serbian accession will definitely be different than Croatian. The challenge would be ensuring the necessary differentiation and lessons learned were there, but with enough consistency that the process was understandable and fair. One participant put this as a need for a level playing field, with recognition for individual effort.