

Report

Article 17 dialogue meeting with the European Commission - EU enlargement package

11 March 2024

On 11 March 2024, Thomas Hagleitner, Head of Unit, 'Western Balkans Policy & Regional Strategy' in DG NEAR (European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations) presented the 2023 Enlargement package adopted by the Commission in November 2023 (for more information: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2023-enlargement-package-recommends-open-negotiations-ukraine-and-moldova-grant-2023-11-08_en). Following the presentation, an exchange of views took place with the Article 17 dialogue partners (see list of participating organisations).

Mr Hagleitner gave an overview of the enlargement policy 20 years after the 2004 enlargement (but also 50 years after the first enlargement and 30 years after the Copenhagen membership criteria were adopted). Enlargement is not only quantitative, but also qualitative, changing the shape of the European Union, as its composition is changing. This is why it is important to prepare well for enlargement and the Commission is preparing a Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews.

Another important issue raised in the context of enlargement, in particular the war in Ukraine waged by Russia, is whether enlargement should be 'geopolitical' or a standards-based process. The drive behind the current enlargement process is largely geopolitical (Russian war of aggression against Ukraine), but the Commission considers that this process must fundamentally remain standards-based. In this context, the annual country enlargement reports will continue to address fundamental rights and in particular the respect for freedom of religion and belief.

As the enlargement process is quite demanding (which can generate difficulties, in particular in small countries with a limited administrative capacity), this can generate frustrations within the societies of enlargement countries. The new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Ukraine Facility are examples of instruments aimed to bring immediate tangible benefits to the citizens, bringing early benefits related to the 'internal market' and enhanced socio-economic standards before accession itself. The importance of concrete progress (eg. free roaming) was mentioned.

Following this presentation, the floor was open to participants for questions and presentation of the actions developed in this field by participants in the meeting. The main points mentioned were:

- The religious and non-confessional organisations present expressed a general support for the enlargement process (in particular the inclusion of Moldova and Ukraine) but also expressed a number of concerns with the process. The role of religious organisations in peace building and conflict prevention was mentioned.
- The importance of expectations management was mentioned as enlargement is raising high expectations but the accession process is a long one which can generate frustrations. The existence of financial instruments to provide incentives to keep the process going mentioned by the Commission was acknowledged.

- The issue of migration was mentioned as well (the Commission responded that under free movement provisions, transitional periods for accessing the EU labour market can be provided for; the management of external borders is also a challenge – though it is limited in the case of Western Balkans which is surrounded by EU Member States).
- The situation in Ukraine was mentioned, in particular its law on religious organisations with external ties, as a case where respect for freedom of religion or belief should be addressed by the European Commission.
- The issue of countries with part of their territories occupied (Moldova, Ukraine) and their accession prospects as addressed, pointing to the Cyprus case as a precedent where a solution was found.
- The enlargement should be a citizen's focused process and it would be useful to organise 'citizens' assemblies' which could bring believers from different churches, gathering members from enlargement countries and Member States (with a view to overcome the East-West divide one can see within the EU). The aim would be to foster contacts and breaking cultural prejudices (the example of Erasmus was mentioned).
- The importance of internal EU reform ahead of enlargement was mentioned (Commission referred to its upcoming Communication adopted on 20 March 2024: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_24_1568).