Interview with Michael Leigh, Director-General for Enlargement of the European Commission

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Michael Leigh, you have been the negotiator with the Czech Republic, you have conducted negotiations with Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus, and Malta, you have been responsible for relations with Kiev, and you are Director General for the Enlargement Department of the European Commission. Could you summarize enlargement’s main achievements?

One often says enlargement has been the EU’s most successful external policy. Each enlargement has in fact enriched the EU and has increased the scope of the EU’s policies. The first enlargement in 1973, which brought in the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland, was actually the beginning of what we now call the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This first enlargement eventually led not only to CFSP but to the development of the European Free Trade Area. This enlargement was at the origin of what is now the Regional Fund, which funded important industrial restructuring, such as that in the northeast of England. As well, when Spain, Portugal, and Greece joined the EU, the Common Agricultural Policy was extended to Mediterranean agriculture to fund the cultivation of grapes, the production of wine, olives, and olive oil. When Sweden and Finland joined the EU, there was a big change in the administrative culture of Europe. They brought their traditional high standards of responsibility and accountability, such as the Ombudsman system. This last enlargement was different in terms of the number of countries involved and it brought special challenges for the functioning of institutions. Many of these countries had rather different histories and far lower income levels than the existing member states.

Positive aspects of enlargement include the growth rates in the new EU member states, which are clearly much higher than the growth rates in the older member states, pulling up the EU average. A market of a hundred
millions consumers with rising incomes provides a much needed stimulus in these difficult days.

We observe, from one side, enlargement fatigue in the old EU countries. From another side, we feel also willingness, determination, and impatience to join the EU. How to combine these opposite trends is a political challenge for the EU. Does the EU consider a different type of membership for some of the Balkan countries — not a full membership in the EU, but a different status for some of the future members?

That is an easy question. The answer is no. There is only one type of membership in the European Union: full membership.

So far.

Well, I do not think anybody is interested in anything else. Sometimes people wrongly refer to association as ‘associate membership.’ But in fact there’s no such thing as associate membership. People also like to say ‘full membership’ or ‘fully-fledged membership,’ but that’s the only kind of membership there is.

Could you present the enlargement agenda?

For the moment, the agenda covers the Western Balkans and Turkey. Three countries are recognised as formal candidates for membership of the EU: Turkey, Croatia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Turkey and Croatia are involved in accession negotiations, which they began in 2005. Croatia’s negotiations have advanced fairly well. The Croatian government is pressing to have some kind of indication as to when these negotiations will be completed. In its 2008 enlargement package, adopted in November, the Commission indicated ways that it can approach the final stage of these negotiations. Although Croatia has made much progress, it is necessary for this country to meet the set benchmarks. And in some areas, there is still room for improvement: the fight against organised crime and corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and improving the functioning of the judiciary. Also in some key economic sectors like shipbuilding and steel, industries need to be restructured, while taking into consideration the competition rule of the European Union. There’s also a need to fulfil all the existing obligations under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, and to ease the return of refugees, particularly through the provision of housing.