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Copenhagen accession criteria: 20 years that changed Europe

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Minister Wammen, Distinguished Guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I’m delighted to be here in Copenhagen today, the "home" of the membership criteria that must be satisfied by a country that wants to become a member of the European Union.

This time twenty years ago was a time of economic and democratic transition for the countries in Central and Eastern Europe. And it was a time of hope for their citizens. Not unlike our current approach in the western Balkans, the clear objective of our enlargement policy was to support the reforms and ensure the advancement of peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe.

This was recognised by the Nobel Committee last year when they announced the peace prize; reminding us that enlargement has been and continues to be a success story for Europe as a whole.

The Copenhagen criteria have played a pivotal role in how this policy has been designed and implemented. As it is twenty years since the criteria were formalised, I want to take a closer look at how they have delivered by highlighting three key aspects of the criteria: their conditionality, their impact; and their continued relevance.

Let me start with conditionality.

In the early nineties, Europe was undergoing dramatic geopolitical change. New democracies were emerging on our doorstep. The challenges of transition were immense. With the prospect of the European Union more than doubling its membership, the Copenhagen criteria clearly set out the rules of the game, firmly anchoring conditionality in the accession process.

The political criteria required new Member States to ensure stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities. The economic criteria called for the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union. Aspiring states would have to be able to take on the full body of European Union rules and regulations. The European Union's ability to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration, was also an important consideration.

Conditionality as a concept was not new but its formal adoption, here in Copenhagen, armed the accession process with objectivity and predictability. The Copenhagen Criteria served and continue to serve as an objective counterpart of the political commitments, increasing the credibility of the whole policy.

The second key aspect concerns the impact of the criteria.

Enlargement is a gradual process, based on solid and sustainable implementation of reforms by the countries concerned. This is where the impact of conditionality driven by the Copenhagen criteria comes into play. The prospect of accession drives political and economic reforms, transforming societies and creating new opportunities for citizens and businesses. It reinforces the European Union's political and economic strengths.
The accession of countries in Central and Eastern Europe in 2004 united East and West after decades of artificial separation, contributing to overall stability and security. It also provided concrete, mutual benefits of:

- deeper trade integration;
- a larger internal market;
- economies of scale; and
- expanded investment and job opportunities.

The current enlargement wave provides further impressive evidence of the transformative power of conditionality combined with a clear European perspective. Less than twenty years ago, the region of the Western Balkans was seen as a place of destruction and despair. Now it is consolidating peace and stability.

Croatia, torn by conflict not long ago, is due to join the European Union on 1 July;

Membership negotiations have started with Montenegro;

Serbia and Kosovo have struck a historic deal which paves the way for them to advance decisively in their European perspectives;

And in Turkey the European Union remains a key anchor for democratic modernisation.

Allow me to turn to the third key aspect which concerns the relevance of the Copenhagen criteria. The American Constitution is said to have kept its relevance over so many years because of its brevity: it focuses on the essentials while the subsequent amendments keep it up to date with the changing reality and new challenges that America's founding fathers could not obviously foresee. I am glad that the Copenhagen criteria, although much younger, follow the same principle: they set out the essentials.

These criteria are as relevant today as they were in 1993. They are governed by Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and central to the renewed enlargement consensus of 2006, which forms the basis of our enlargement policy today.

Today, while the conditionality of enlargement remains the same, the way we apply it has evolved based on what we have learnt from past enlargements. We have increased the focus on good governance and the rule of law, including judicial reform, public administration reform and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

The new approach to negotiations in the policy areas of judiciary and fundamental rights, as well as justice, freedom and security, is a case in point. Tackling these areas early in the negotiations gives maximum time to enlargement countries to establish the necessary legislation, institutions, and solid track records of implementation before the negotiations are closed. This ensures that reforms are deeply rooted and irreversible, fostering stability and reducing the risks of illegal immigration and infiltration of criminality.

To give you an example of how seriously we take this work, let me mention the peer review exercise on chapters 23 and 24 in Montenegro. There have already been nearly 100 meetings on issues such as asylum, migration, border management, the fight against corruption, judicial reform and fundamental rights.

This is concrete evidence of the hard work and determination that is maintaining enlargement momentum. Despite lower support for enlargement member states are very credible in their approach to enlargement. If the candidate countries are credible in delivering on membership criteria, the Member States act on it. So, we can talk about "enlargement fatigue" but you will not find any evidence of it in our approach to enlargement. But we should do, instead, something about the reform fatigue.
Before concluding I want to say a few words about economic governance. When most people talk of the Copenhagen criteria, they think of the political criteria but we shouldn't forget the importance of addressing the economic criteria early in the process.

The European Union is undergoing far-reaching changes to its economic governance and enlargement countries need to be informed, involved and associated as closely as possible to the process. This will help them get sound financial rules and budgets in place before they join. And it ensures that acceding countries will not only be able to fully implement European Union obligations, but also to face future challenges. With our interdependent economies, this will benefit the European Union as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The effectiveness of the enlargement process is largely the result of its solid backbone: the Copenhagen criteria. They have stood the test of time and, through improved application, they continue today to provide the framework, guidance and inspiration for our enlargement policy.

Thank you for your attention.