

## **The 20th anniversary of the biggest EU enlargement**

1 May 2004 was a historic turning point for ten countries in the heart of Europe. Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia joined the EU family. It was a moment of celebration, unity and limitless opportunity. Let's take a closer look at this milestone event.

The European Union has expanded a number of times throughout its history, when new Member States have joined. In 2004, the European Union underwent its largest-ever expansion, welcoming ten new countries: Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Following the enlargement, the EU consisted of 25 Member States. But the vision for the future at that time was to expand towards an EU of 30 Member States.

Why is this enlargement so significant? To start with, it marked the largest single expansion of the European Union. In total, three former Soviet Republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – four former satellite states of the USSR – Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – a former republic of Yugoslavia – Slovenia – and two Mediterranean islands – Cyprus and Malta – all became EU Member States. These countries embarked on a journey towards greater cooperation, prosperity and solidarity.

This enlargement meant much more than a mere increase in the number of EU countries; it signalled a shift in the geopolitical landscape, one that would shape the future of Europe for generations to come. The enlargement extended the borders of the European Union to the east and reinforced its role as a stabilising force in Europe.

Why did these nations want to become members of the EU? For many of them, it was a chance to embrace the promise of democracy, freedom and opportunity that the EU symbolised. The enlargement followed the fall of communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, allowing these countries to transition to democracy and market economies. This historic enlargement from 15 to 25 Member States was the culmination of a long accession process that led to the reunification of Europe, a Europe that had been divided for half a century by the Iron Curtain and the Cold War.

The 2004 expansion also had significant implications for languages in the EU, or, you might say, they posed a challenge unlike any other. The number of official EU languages increased from 11 to 20. The nine new languages were Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Czech, Slovak and Slovene. Nine new translation units were created in the translation service of the European Parliament to make it accessible in the newly added languages. In the years leading up to the enlargement, when the membership negotiations were ongoing, existing language staff started to prepare themselves for the introduction of the new languages by taking part in extensive language study programmes.

The EU's kaleidoscope of languages has become a testament to its commitment to inclusivity and diversity. Each language isn't just a means of communication – it's a

window into a country's history, culture and identity. Through translation and interpreting, the EU ensures that every voice is heard.

After the start of this fifth enlargement with 10 countries joining in 2004, and Bulgaria and Romania joining in 2007, Croatia became a member in 2013. Fast forward two decades, and the impact of the 2004 enlargement is still being felt across Europe. The EU has reaffirmed its role as a beacon of hope, progress and cooperation in an ever-changing world.

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