The focus of today’s conference is very much the domestic dimension of Romania’s efforts to join the European Union (EU). Before we begin hearing about and discussing various of the processes and challenges associated with domestic preparations for membership, I should like to offer some more general observations about Romania’s evolving relationship with the EU and in doing so comment on the broader context for Romania’s efforts to accede to this expanding Union.

Evidently over the last decade and more, Romania has moved increasingly from the margins of the European integration process towards full inclusion in its central embodiment, the EU. But as the question mark in the title to this contribution indicates, it is not 100 per cent certain that full inclusion will result. The envisaged date of accession – 2007 – is fast approaching. We are half way from the date when the then Foreign Minister, Petre Roman, declared the date. Yet, as we shall hear later, there is still much to be done before the EU will admit Romania. Equally, as I shall suggest here, the broader context of the enlargement process may change, potentially affecting the realisation of accession in 2007.

Back briefly to the domestic dimension. As we are all aware, Romania is formally obliged to meet certain criteria and assume certain obligations before it will be admitted to the EU. To date it has
been slow in doing so. The Copenhagen criteria are well known and as the European Commission’s annual reports on Romania’s preparedness for membership have shown, a variety of these are being met. It is fair to say, however, that questions continue to be raised concerning whether Romania indeed fully meets both the political and the economic criteria. As far as the former is concerned, much has certainly been achieved since the early 1990s when considerable doubts were expressed concerning the commitment to democracy and the rule of law. Yet problems, for example of corruption, persist. On the economic front, Romania has still to be granted ‘functioning market economy’ status by the European Commission (although it may not have much longer to wait). And even when assuming it will gain such a status, further economic reform is required before Romania will meet the economic criteria for membership. Added to this, the Commission’s annual reports continually question Romania’s capacity to assume the obligations of EU membership. Of particular note is the capacity of Romania’s public administration to implement in full the acquis communautaire.

Clearly, Romania’s progress towards membership of the EU very much depends on the extent to which it addresses the issues above. For many therefore, membership depends on promoting domestic reform so as to meet the accession criteria laid down by the EU. That this is recognized is to be welcomed. Yet as I want to argue here, to understand Romania’s position within the EU’s enlargement process as well as its prospects for gaining membership, we need to be aware of the broader context of enlargement. Focusing on domestic developments is important for explaining progress towards membership. But is must not be forgotten that the dynamics of the enlargement process are not driven solely by the state of preparedness of candidate countries for membership.

In the case of Romania, three general arguments should be noted.
First, it should be recalled that its relations with the EU since 1989 have developed within the context of the EU’s relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe generally. And I would argue that Romania owes its current position in the enlargement process very much to the dynamics of that broader evolving relationship.

Second, Romania’s position has been influenced by external events over which it has had no control or influence. These generally have helped ensure inclusion in as opposed to marginalisation from the European integration and EU enlargement processes.

Third, its position owes much to its southern neighbour – Bulgaria – and the fact that the EU has tended to treat the two as a block. Romania has arguably benefited on various occasions and continues to benefit from this coupling.

Where is the evidence to support the contention that this broader process is so important? Four points are worth noting.

First, in the early 1990s, there was considerable concern over Romania’s commitment to political and economic reform and consequently there was a notable reluctance within the EU to move quickly towards the negotiation and conclusion of a Europe Agreement, for example. Yet the Moscow coup of August 1991 soon prompted the EU to be more accommodating. Consequently, Romania signed a Europe Agreement in 1993 and became involved in the various mechanisms of the so-called ‘structured relationship’ involving the CEE countries in political dialogue with the EU, despite the protests from the Visegrad-4.

Second, in the 1997, the response of the European Council to Agenda 2000 was to launch an ‘inclusive and evolutive’ accession process involving all the applicant countries from
Central and Eastern Europe. This was despite the critical nature of the Commission’s *avis* on Romania and the clear concerns that existed about the progress that had been made with reform. That Romania was included in the accession process had much to do with the majority of EU member states wishing to avoid notions of ‘ins’ and ‘outs’ and renewed differentiation in the EU’s relations with the applicant countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Fears certainly existed that to exclude countries from the process would undermine economic and political reform. Moreover, there was the need to offer countries Central and Eastern Europe some compensation for NATO’s decision at the Madrid Summit to extend invitations to join to only the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Romania was arguably a beneficiary of these developments.

− Third, and arguably most obviously, the Kosovo conflict in 1999 prompted the EU to open accession negotiations with Romania following the Helsinki European Council. Various explanations exist for the decision of the European Commission to recommend the opening of negotiations even though the 1999 regular report was particularly critical of Romanian efforts to pursue economic reform. It actually criticised Romania for a worsening of the economic situation. For some, the decisions of the European Commission and the European Council were a ‘reward’ for Romania’s support for NATO; for others they were compensation for NATO’s decision not to issue new invitations to join at its Washington Summit in spring 1999, despite the alleged promise to do so at Madrid two years earlier. Whatever, the fact is that had there been no Kosovo, then Romania may not have opened accession negotiations in 2000.

− Fourth, there is the matter of the 2007 target date. Despite persistent concerns over Romania’s preparedness for membership, its eventual accession has become part of the EU’s rhetoric about enlargement. Academic analysis of the current enlargement process points out that EU decisions concerning enlargement are not necessarily based on hard-nosed cost-benefit analyses but are being driven by what is referred to as ‘rhetorical
entrapment'. Arguably, enlargement makes no sense. The costs, whether calculated on an economic or a political basis, are high. Membership entails budgetary costs for all existing member states, primarily through lower receipts, and threatens to make the EU unworkable – the EU. It is worth recalling, will from 1 May 2004 have more than four times as many members as it had when the original Six began the enterprise in the 1950s. All the same, the EU is persisting with enlargement and will shortly undergo its biggest ever expansion. Indeed, if we accept the idea of rhetorical entrapment, is has to enlarge – it has issued statement upon statement proclaiming it is intention to do so, notably at Copenhagen (1993), Luxembourg (1997) and Helsinki (1999). If it does not honour those statements, then it will lose credibility. Enlargement must take place. The significance of all this for Romania is clear: Romania is one of the candidate countries to which the EU’s statements apply. Moreover, as the Joint Declaration ‘One Europe’ attached to the 2003 Treaty of Accession reiterates, the enlargement process is ‘continuous, inclusive and irreversible’ and the enlarged EU’s aim is ‘to welcome Bulgaria and Romania as members in 2007’. The point was also made at the Thessaloniki European Council in June 2003.

Taking the last point, does this mean that Romania is locked into a process of enlargement that will without doubt see it join the EU in 2007? The rhetoric suggests further enlargement will take place. Why issue the ‘One Europe’ declaration if there is no intention to see the process through? Allowing a date to enter into the rhetoric reflects commitment and intent. And, there is much evidence supporting the argument that enlargement will take place in 2007.

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However, a number of questions might usefully be posed before we conclude that Romania in 2007 will take its place within the new enlarged EU...

1. Will the rhetorical commitment to a ‘continuous, inclusive and irreversible’ enlargement process survive the 2004 enlargement or will the EU be freed from its rhetorical entrapment and feel at liberty to revise its commitment to enlargement?

2. Will conditionality be allowed to drive the process of enlargement more obviously than has been the case to date? Will the EU start to use insufficient preparedness as a justification for delaying the accession of individual states?

3. Will the EU, after the 2004 enlargement, adopt a more hard-nosed, rational approach to enlargement, weighing up the financial costs and benefits of admitting Romania, the second largest of the CEE candidate countries and a state many expect to be a long-term drain on the EU budget. On this it is worth noting that agreement on the EU’s next financial perspective (as well as potentially reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the Structural Funds) needs to be reached before enlargement beyond EU(25) can take place.

4. Will the interests of individual member states come to the fore more and make Romanian accession contingent on a bargain being struck between existing member states? To Romania’s disadvantage, it has few genuine champions within the EU.

5. Will the experience of the 2004 enlargement put the EU off from enlarging further, at least quickly? The scale of the 2004 enlargement is certainly unprecedented. And few can say with any confidence that it will proceed smoothly. Any serious hitches may lead to further enlargement being postponed.

With enlargement in 2004, new questions have to be taken into consideration when considering the future of the enlargement process and the completion of Romania’s journey from
marginalization to inclusion in the EU. To date, Romania has arguably reached the position it is in today in terms of integration with the EU owing as much to events and developments beyond its control as its own efforts. This broader context, however, will change with enlargement next year.

The most obvious change will be the fewer number of candidates. As a consequence, much attention will be focused on Romania as an individual candidate. Its preparations for membership will fall under the spotlight more. For Romania, therefore, completing the journey from marginalisation to inclusion will depend very much on the extent to which the country successfully grapples with many of the issues which are going to be discussed today.