

Guest Editorial

On the Threshold of Eastern Enlargement of the EU

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We are all pretty well aware of the grand issues the European Union is facing. The political agenda of the EU towards the year 2000 was introduced by the Madrid European Council in December 1995. An important part of this agenda is the next EU enlargement to embrace the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and Cyprus. Let me concentrate on this formidable challenge to the EU and modern democratic politics in Europe in general.

Simply stated in political terms, Eastern enlargement is about the reuniting of Europe. It is about the final overcoming of the Yalta division of the continent. Three European states, Austria, Sweden and Finland, have already profited from the fall of the Berlin Wall. Only after the cold war ended were they able to join the political and economic institutions of European integration. Now the time has come for the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe to grasp the fruit of liberty for which they fought for so many years after the Second World War.

The political agenda of the EU speaks about the institutions, policies and financial reforms necessary for successful enlargement. Rightly so. The EU of modern times cannot be a simple extension of the EEC of the 1950s. Therefore voices are raised sometimes for a more cautious approach, for a delay in the EU expansion process in the hope of a more profound internal reform. The story of NATO is similar: a number of opinions were presented in favour of weakening the resolution of the American administration and other member states to quickly absorb the new members. That is understandable. The Western security, political and economic institutions worked well for so many years. The conservative attitude is based on a natural psychological reluctance to change. This approach, however, is short-sighted. Both institutions, NATO and the EU, need some sort of renewal simply because of profound change of the times we live in. In both cases Eastern enlargement will provide

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the leaders with an opportunity to focus on the core issue – the success of both institutions in a new setting.

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs) have long dreamed about freedom, security and prosperity. With this guidance in our minds we entered upon the road of swift democratization and free-market reforms. Some other countries in the region somewhat hesitated to go this way. The winter of 1996, however, proved that the changes must take place, even if belatedly. Both Romania and Bulgaria joined the reforming group, and some hope for a more substantial change has been brought about by three months of successful protests on the streets of Belgrade. In the view of many observers, Bulgaria has recently ‘surprised’ the world with its bid for NATO membership. The country once perceived as the staunchest ally of Russia has asked for membership of NATO, which is usually regarded by Russian politicians, wrongly, as their arch-enemy. There is something telling in these recent experiences. Both institutions, NATO and the EU, are again ‘victims’ of their success. Both must live up to it.

It seems NATO is well on its way to enlargement. The EU should do the same. Perhaps the EU may repeat the example of NATO and name the first countries to negotiate EU membership as soon as possible after the ongoing Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC). Certainly, much as we hope for quick membership of both NATO and the EU, it is not in our interest to join those organizations unprepared, or to weaken them by joining. The IGC – we hope – should deliver substantial results to enable the EU to function properly after enlargement. It is hoped the Commission will by that time be ready with its opinions (*avis*) on the candidates, as well as with its evaluation of the impact of enlargement on the EU’s various policies and financial matters.

I do not see why the moment of concluding the IGC cannot also be used for launching the negotiations on enlargement. Why should we wait six months for this? There are – and there will always be – bureaucratic hurdles on the way. Yet we should follow the bold objectives of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and President Jacques Chirac and achieve enlargement by the millennium year 2000. Let us open the new century with a new security and a new political landscape in Europe.

What is Important to the Associated Countries

The associated countries are on their way in preparing for membership negotiations and entry to the EU. The transformation of our economies began already in 1989 and is continuing. We went through an initial period of quick change, followed by a period of stabilization of the

reform process. The macro- and microeconomic adjustments were always, and continue to be, based on sound policy requirements indicated by the Maastricht convergence criteria.

The politics in associated countries like Poland have recently entered a new period of stabilization. The consecutive presidential and parliamentary elections prove that our societies are well on the way to fully embracing the democratic rules of governance. Certainly future membership can only foster those changes. The European Union and NATO are widely perceived as firm anchors of democracy and peace in the region. Let us then review a couple of principles by which – in my view – future enlargement should be guided.

1. Time and Calendar

The European Council in Madrid made the first attempt to formulate the calendar of enlargement: the negotiations can start six months after the conclusion of the IGC. As mentioned above, I can see no reason why we could not start sooner. Already in 1992 the Visegrad Countries Memorandum indicated that the CEECs will seek membership in accordance with the so-called ‘Iberian formula’ (quick membership followed by adjustment periods), tested in the cases of Spain and Portugal. This method would in our view be better than that experienced by Austria, Finland and Sweden. For newly democratized countries, time is crucial. The sooner we can find firm anchor the less volatile the political, and consequently economic, situation in our countries will be. We must do everything necessary and possible for enlarged Union by 2000.

2. Reciprocity of Interests

The remark about timetabling reflects my deep conviction that quick enlargement is in the interest of both sides: the EU and the CEECs. It would provide the EU with an extra stimulus for better allocation of resources and greater competitiveness *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world. It will work towards reducing the structural element of European unemployment. It would enhance EU legitimacy and would promote its image as the main stability factor on the continent of Europe.

The stability of Central and Eastern Europe can only be achieved by gradual enlargement of the EU. Any dreams about keeping this part of Europe isolated and contained can only prove wrong, as the past shows. This is not because the region is so unstable by itself; it is because it is vitally important for the major European players, and therefore cannot be

left in a void. Left outside of integrated Europe the area may always provide temptations to play the old game. An early membership is also very much in the interest of the candidate countries. The stability of their political systems depends substantially on the overall, general direction in which the countries are moving. Regardless of this orientation (although the Western one seems only natural for any European country), once a direction is chosen by a society, it contributes to the general social stability and prosperity of the country considered.

One may argue that in terms of economic integration membership in the EU is not necessary. In the case of Poland already over 60 per cent of foreign trade is with EU countries. Yet, leaving aside the political benefits of membership, the stability of inflow of foreign investment into Central and Eastern Europe can only be assured with membership. Only then will investors perceive the risks as comparable to those in other EU Member States.

3. Political Commitment

Perhaps a corollary of reciprocity is the question of political commitment, which can only be seen and felt from a clearly defined timetable of enlargement and its firm application. Political commitment is a vital point in any policy requiring wide support of an electorate – this is surely the case on both sides with regard to the issue of enlargement. In Poland, the future place of the country among the nations of Europe now enjoys growing support of up to 80 per cent of the people. This gives legitimacy to the actions – sometimes difficult, as any restructuring may be – undertaken on the road to achieving a modern state, which is by the same token the road to EU membership.

In the EU Member States the role of leadership in successful management of the enlargement process is crucial. The issue of enlargement should not be presented as a burden, but instead should be seen as an historical opportunity for all Europe. As much as it may be a burden in terms of budgetary issues, it is nevertheless a chance for nearly everybody, for every European, for every country. It needs a power of conviction similar to that shown by European leaders in the case of the single market.

4. Predictability of Action and Clarity of Principles

Certainly the EU enlargement will be a long process divided into stages or waves. As such it can only be properly managed if the actions taken (negotiations, membership treaties, adjustment periods) are predictable

to those temporarily outside. In my view this requires full clarity of principles applied: the standards according to which some are more advanced than others, and the requirements to be fulfilled for future membership.

This question also applies to the current stage of integration, not solely to the issue of enlargement. The EU is actually facing procedural issues as it tries to work out the relationship between the 'ins' and 'outs' in the third stage of EMU, and considers the general possibility of introducing flexibility into the Treaty. The closer we come to nominating actual participants in the euro, the more intensely we see how acute may be the problems of transparency of rules and their strict application. We should use all means possible to avoid arousing feelings of isolation among those not involved in early stages of enlargement, a feeling of being permanently left outside.

5. The New Shape of the EU

What also matters is how the EU will look in the future and how it will work. The market by itself is a strong stabilizing factor. It is not sufficient, however. The years under communism taught us to hope that there was something better than our world; that there was somewhere a liberal democratic 'paradise' of liberty, peace and prosperity. Prosperity is important, but it was not the main driving force of, say, *Solidarność* in 1980 in Poland. Living a 'normal' life, being able to travel freely and safely, being able to associate, is equally – if not more – vital.

Thus the Union cannot be a simple market. It should be an area of cooperation between Member States which provides for those liberties in a modern reality of globalization and free and safe movement of people, capital, services and goods. The framework of security is indispensable for achieving this. The EU should have a capacity to play an important part in shaping today's problematics on its territory, at its borders, and outside. Perhaps the worst scenario is that of a 'flexible' Europe in tiers, bereft of the key notion of solidarity, returning to the old rivalries, unable to provide its citizens with security, and ultimately dispossessed of legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. We must avoid this with all strength. We need a strong Europe. We *all* need it.