

Guest Editorial

The EU and the Challenge of Enlargement

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It is in the lexicon of politicians that the enlargement of the EU is an historic opportunity. Perhaps for once we are guilty of an understatement. The scale of the opportunity that now presents itself to establish political stability across the continent of greater Europe is breathtaking and unique. The history of Europe has been the history of war. But now there is an opportunity to put in place political structures to build a better future.

The founding fathers of the European Communities had little doubt that peace and security could be established through the right political structures. Political stability was the goal; ever closer political union the chosen vehicle. And despite centuries of Franco-German conflict, political stability has been established in Western Europe. We now have a unique opportunity to take this prize to every corner of Europe.

The establishment of political stability in greater Europe should be by far our highest priority and our one overriding purpose. It must be the aim of policy makers to enlarge the European Union to encompass all the territory of Europe, however defined. Membership of the EU is the vehicle by which the goal of stability can be reached, from Portugal to Georgia and from Iceland to Turkey. Enlargement of the EU is the most vital mission of our generation.

But what sort of enlargement and what sort of EU? We should not limit ourselves to previous or existing structures simply because they have served a purpose over the past fifty years. Western Europe is more stable, peaceful and prosperous than at any time in history. Yet that should not blind the observer to the limitations of the chosen model of European integration. After fifty years we have created structures within the EU which are acceptable to Sweden but not Norway, to Austria but not Switzerland, Finland but not Iceland. How much

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harder will it be therefore to come up with structures which are acceptable to Croatia and the Ukraine as well as Estonia and Poland? And yet this is the challenge.

When Newt Gingrich suggested in April 1998 that the EU would be better advised to forget monetary union and pursue closer links with NAFTA he attracted a predictable response. While there is little prospect of the change in Europe's direction along the lines he suggests, Gingrich's observation highlights an old, but still unresolved argument. What balance should be struck between an inward-looking Union, prioritizing the 'deepening' of integration, and an outward-looking Union seeking to 'widen' Europe?

Some politicians see enlargement as simply an unwelcome distraction to the EU's main role, namely furthering the interests of its members. A members' club. To take that approach is to miss the historic opportunity that is before us. Already there is resistance to the pace of change of enlargement set out in Agenda 2000. I have heard senior continental politicians say that no new countries should join the EU for seven or ten years. By then the door may be firmly closed and the opportunity lost.

In the last twelve months I have travelled extensively throughout the eleven applicant countries and met many of their leading politicians. For all of them, without exception, there is only one strategic objective: to join the EU. They have no more important goal. Of course they are attracted to the funds available to deal with many of the infrastructure problems that beset them. But it goes far deeper than that. Having left communism behind they now see within their grasp a real chance to establish proper democracies, real market economies, the rule of law and basic human rights in their countries – in some cases for the first time. They see in future EU membership the prospect of a peace and prosperity that has so far eluded them. It is momentum towards membership of the EU which enables them to introduce and underpin the necessary policies to establish these benefits in their own countries. But we should be under no illusions. There are many forces at work in many of these countries that would seek to undermine this strategy: organized crime, military malcontents and other reactionary forces.

If momentum towards membership is stalled it may never be possible to regenerate it, and the window of opportunity may well close.

Europe, I suggest, must seize the day. Peace and security was the goal of the EU's founding fathers and we have reaped the benefits. Peace and security throughout greater Europe should now be the goal for all of us. To achieve this I suggest the following five priorities:

- Political leaders throughout Europe must rekindle the original vision of peace and security. We must seek to inspire others to embrace this historic opportunity. It is a time for courage and decisive leadership. I have lost count of the people who have conveyed to me the understandable but misguided belief that countries only want to join the EU to get our grants. We have not sold the long-term benefits of enlargement to our electorates, and we must.
- The EU must see the drive towards enlargement as its key priority. It must not allow this process to stall, or erect too many unattainable obstacles to the entry process. Is it really necessary for applicant countries to join EMU, when there are existing Member States who do not wish to join or cannot meet the conditions, yet still continue to play a full part in the EU? If the key ingredients for past success have been democracy, the rule of law and a market economy, it is these requirements which should be the primary conditions for membership. Entry into membership at an early stage will be the best guarantee of those key building blocks being put in place, enabling inward investment and the market to do their work.
- The EU must re-examine its structures in the light of the enlargement opportunities that present themselves. If the goal is political stability, is it necessarily the case that further integration is now helpful to that cause? This does nothing to welcome into membership the many countries of Europe which aspire to membership. The EU must learn to reinvent itself, as all successful organizations do in the light of changing circumstances and new challenges. The structures and thinking developed after the war and in a cold war era may not be the best structures as we approach the twenty-first century. The old model of the EU was never designed for post-cold war enlargement.

How should the EU respond to the challenges, for example, of the Balkans? The very existence of Bosnia-Herzegovina is under threat from forces within and without. Should not the EU develop a new solution; a new kind of relationship with Bosnia-Herzegovina underpinning its existence in anticipation of medium- or long-term membership?

How can the EU bear down upon the Croatian leadership to do more for refugee returnees? Surely in the context of Croatia's desperation to make progress towards membership new solutions may emerge. And so a new focus on enlargement, combined with the flexibility that such a concept will involve, is called for.

The EU should see EFTA and the EEA as a transitional stage in the enlargement of the Union, facilitating the eventual entry of Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. Yet the enlargement to the

EFTA countries remains at risk from issues of substance that the EU is doing nothing to address.

- Leading politicians and officials in the EU must think creatively about the new challenges facing us. It is often the case that we approach tomorrow's problems with yesterday's solutions. The EU must do better than that. It should inspire a debate about its relationship with NATO, another structure that is having to reinvent itself. The problems facing Europe today are no longer the horrendous prospect of Russian tanks pouring across the Hungarian plains. Ethnic conflicts, organized crime, drug running, boundary disputes – these are the issues that now confront Europe. What is the EU's response to them? How can the EU stand behind Member States to support them in their attack on these problems? To what extent are relationships with NATO, WEU and Europol being developed to address these issues? What new transnational vehicles are being considered to respond to the real threats to personal and national security that can best be dealt with on a supranational level?
- The EU should reflect seriously upon the implications of further integration. It would be a huge mistake to allow EMU to spearhead a further drive towards the political integration of existing members. It may well be that one day electorates of Member States will be able to see and feel democracy in the context of the European Union, however large it is. But that day has not yet come, and frankly it is a long way off. Most of us define ourselves in the context of our nationality. For democracy to flourish a people group must be able to elect and remove its leaders, and in so doing change the policies they pursue. Although this basic view of democratic accountability is inevitably diminished to some extent in today's interdependent global economy, it remains a guiding principle. The more we build political structures that transfer decision making away from the Member States the more we run the risk of undermining the very vision and objective of the founding fathers: political stability.

A great deal of energy and effort has been put by European leaders into squeezing eleven economies into monetary union. I detect a sense of exhaustion with the European project in many capitals around the continent. But that will not do. We need all of that drive and energy to be refocused and let loose once more; not this time on a project of yet more integration. This time rapid enlargement, establishing democracy, the rule of law and economic prosperity throughout greater Europe should be our goal. It is a vision for all of us, a vision whose time has come.