

Eastern Europe's Churches and the Challenge of EU Integration

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Introduction

Westerners generally do not realise how central a foreign policy issue the question of EU membership has been in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. It is the nexus around which all economic and political discussion has taken place. There are no significant differences between the centre-right and the former communists (the centre-left) on the issue; only some fringe parties are opposed to EU membership. The candidate countries watch each other like hawks, especially in the context of EU Commission reports on the extent of their readiness to join. Visiting EU ministers are always asked same first question: 'When do you think we'll be allowed to join?' Five post-communist countries have been negotiating membership since March 1998: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia (in addition to Cyprus and Malta). Five others have opened negotiations since - Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia - and some of these are now catching up. The Nice summit in December 2000 agreed that enlargement could take place from 1 January 2003, and Poland hopes to complete the process in time for the European Parliament elections in 2004.

State of Negotiations

Candidate countries must meet stringent goals in curbing inflation and interest rates. They must ensure that their institutions are democratic and meet the criteria set out in the 1950 European Convention and other documents. They must also incorporate the 'acquis communautaire', the EU's body of regulations and procedures: this means adjusting hundreds of Eastern European laws, covering everything from border controls to textile production limits. Originally the candidate countries were presented with 28 baskets of issues to negotiate, all highly complex. By the end of July 2001 Hungary had 7 left, Slovenia 8, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia 10, Poland 12 and Romania 21. Poland hoped to conclude four more by the end of 2001: on taxes, fisheries, transport and joint ventures. There has been a tendency in the candidate countries to underestimate the economic gap with the West, as a consequence of misplaced optimism about the potential of economic reforms in the early 1990s. The current GDP of Poland, for example, \$90 billion, is barely a twentieth of neighbouring Germany's. The EU estimates it will cost Poland \$18 billion just to reach the ecological standards required, while the World Bank estimate is twice as high. Meanwhile Polish GDP fell from 4 per cent to 2 per cent over the past year. Poland has 18 per cent unemployment and a huge budget deficit; the recent election indicated deep social disillusionment with current reforms. Monthly salaries

in the candidate countries average around a fifth of Austria's. Although Slovenia is far out in the lead, with more than twice the salary levels of Poland, its citizens currently earn only 41 per cent of the Austrian average.

Support for EU membership

Opinion polls have shown a fall in support over the last four years, connected with a clearer realisation of what EU accession will mean in hard economic terms. There has been criticism of governments which have presented the issue in emotional terms ('correcting historical injustices', 'family of European nations') while failing to provide a proper public information programme. A survey in March 2001 revealed that 65 per cent of Hungarians were in favour, with the rest opposed or undecided, but only 45 per cent of Czechs (a figure which had fallen to 40 per cent by August, with another 40 per cent undecided) and 55 per cent of Poles; a quarter of the votes in the Polish election on 23 September went to anti-EU parties. There have been similar trends among Slovenes and Estonians: in March only 37 per cent of the latter were in favour. A contributory factor to diminishing support, according to sociologists, is a new possibility of second-category membership. Germany and Austria have put forward a joint proposal for a seven-year wait before the establishment of a free labour market. The whole question of expansion is placed well down the agenda at EU summits. Meanwhile opposition within the EU is growing: a Eurobarometer poll in October 2000 revealed an average 44 per cent supporting expansion in EU countries. There is also the feeling that expansion will benefit the EU far more than it will the Eastern European countries themselves. Preoccupations vary from country to country. The Czechs are particularly worried about immigration and sale of land to foreigners. The Poles are worried about the uncompetitiveness of their agriculture. The Hungarians are worried about preserving their distinctive cultural identity and language.

The Churches: Initial Scepticism

Generally speaking churches of all denominations share the same perspective on the prospect of EU membership. There was initial scepticism in the early 1990s, based largely on stereotypes. These included fears about the likely impact on social and moral habits of opening the borders, and fears that parliaments would be obliged to surrender sovereignty, and be required to pass liberal laws on abortion, same-sex marriages and similar subjects. There were also fears about the impact on religious affiliation. In the 1950s, it was pointed out, when the first prototype EU institutions were formed, the churches of Spain and Italy were as full as Poland's, while the Dutch Roman Catholic Church sent more priests abroad as missionaries than it employed at home. Since then, the overall trend in Western church affiliation has been unmistakably downwards. The French Roman Catholic Church, for example, had 45,000 priests in 1945, but is expected to have fewer than 10,000 by 2005. Churches and faith traditions were not mentioned in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty on closer political and economic links - and many in Eastern Europe noticed this. A brief statement recognising the 'status enjoyed by churches and religious associations and communities' was accepted by EU foreign ministers at their June 1997 Amsterdam summit, after lengthy argumentation and under pressure from German theologians, but this was hardly seen as evidence that religion was going to be respected or taken seriously. Another fear was that if predominantly Catholic countries of Eastern

Europe were admitted to the EU this would reinforce the division of Europe between a rich and stable Catholic/Protestant West and a poor and unstable Orthodox East.

The Churches: Increasing Enthusiasm

A sea-change in the churches' attitudes can perhaps be dated from the pope's appeal at Gniezno in 1997, where he met seven heads of state, for an end to Europe's 'invisible wall', and from the Amsterdam summit of the same year. The Vatican had supported the EU from the beginning, and had established diplomatic ties in the early 1970s. Now in 1997 it appointed a head of mission to the EU. In November 1997 a delegation of Polish bishops visited Brussels and returned fully convinced that the EU was the way of the future. (No one quite knows what kind of magic was worked on them). Czech and Hungarian church leaders followed suit in 1998 and 1999, coming back with same conviction. This factor gave a significant boost to the campaign to mobilise public support in these countries. Support came not just from Catholics and Protestants: the Romanian Orthodox Church has also come out strongly in favour of accession. Not everyone in the churches is in favour. I have met Polish priests who have told me that EU membership will bring everything from pollution to rotten food. *Nasz Dziennik*, a nationalist Catholic paper which reflects the views of perhaps 12 per cent of the population, warns that 'A wave of garbage, a postmodernist, liberal slush of pseudo-values - this is what Europe is offering us today. Losing Polish sovereignty, surrendering land to foreign hands, cutting a swathe of unemployment, significantly reducing our youth's education levels, universally killing unborn children - this is all too high a price for being together with the West.' However, the opponents are in a minority in the churches. In a 1998 survey, 84 per cent of Polish priests supported their country's EU accession. Although more than a third thought that the EU should be doing more to 'support churches and religious life', two-thirds felt confident that membership would not affect their own church's position. More than half predicted that integration would open Poland to 'materialistic attitudes', but they also believed that the same problems would occur if Poland remained outside.

Why are the Churches Showing Greater Enthusiasm?

What are the explanations for the change in opinion in the churches of Eastern Europe? First, the realisation that EU membership is the only realistic option, and will help achieve stability and prosperity. In the early 1990s there had been talk of new regional associations or confederations in postcommunist Europe ('Central Europe'; the Visegrad Triangle; a second NATO (Poland-centred); the OSCE). These dreams soon faded. Meanwhile there was permanent instability in Russia and wars in the Caucasus and the Balkans. The churches began to realise that their countries could look in only one direction. Second, the breakdown of the myth of a shared Slavic spiritual heritage. It was becoming clear that the idea of a 'spiritual East' and a 'materialist West' was a false stereotype: the true picture was much more variegated. In the East, the Poles and Slovaks were very religious; not so the very secularised Czechs and eastern Germans. In the West, France, Sweden and Britain were the least religious, but over 75 per cent claimed religious affiliation in Austria, Denmark, Greece, Italy and Portugal. Third, the churches themselves had changed, with new church leaders at the helm who were more open to Western contacts. There are some eight key figures in the Polish Roman Catholic Church. Eastern European churches are now better represented in European consultations: more have joined the WCC,

there is closer involvement in CCEE, with the Czech Cardinal Vlk as president, and Eastern Europeans comprise half of the 34 Bishops' Conferences. There has been expansion of local contacts and assistance: hundreds of Polish priests are working in Western Europe, for example. Eastern European Christians were very involved in producing the Charta Ecumenica in March 2001. Fourth, there has been a change of attitude towards the churches within the EU itself. There has been a growing recognition of the need for the involvement of churches, as key elements in the wider effort to give the EU a deeper dimension (Delors' 'Soul for Europe', and efforts by Santer and Prodi). This development should not be over-stressed; but there is certainly a kind of evolution in attitudes, and a willingness to take church contributions seriously if properly prepared and presented. At the same time the churches are being given assurances that their identities and values will be respected. There are structural relations with CEC, which has 125 member-churches, and COMECE (the Commission of Catholic Bishops' Conferences), which has 15 member-states, with observers from Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. There are links with the Lutheran World Federation and with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. There is increasing emphasis on ecumenical and Europe-wide initiatives (on asylum-seekers and on sustainable development, for example), and increasing efforts to involve candidate countries in consultations over issues such as employment and the environment. Efforts are also being made to bring Orthodox churches into the process.

The Future

At the moment there is a growing gap in Eastern Europe between the intelligentsia, who are lyrical about rejoining the family of Europe, who are encouraged by the political elite, and who already have international links; and the growing number of workers, farmers and small businessmen who are beginning to ask hard economic questions about how EU membership is actually going to affect them. The churches have increasingly been in the former category; but their attitudes may change over the years to come if integration is long delayed. Despite the developments noted above to work more closely with the churches there is still a deep-seated tendency in the EU to see religious traditions as hindering progress towards liberty. Work needs to continue to be done to assure Eastern Europeans that the churches will continue to be taken seriously. A neglected aspect of integration has been a whole gamut of issues under the general heading of 'social attitudes and personal habits'. Integration will require fundamental changes in how people live, work and interact: they need to learn to be efficient, open and tolerant. The churches need to allow society to change, and to change with it. Civil society needs to develop. Post-Franco Spain is often cited as a model for Eastern Europe to follow in this respect. Further integration is needed between the churches of East and West, with their deeply contrasting experiences. Eastern European Catholics, for example, complain that Western Catholics see them as an amorphous block and show no interest in the specifics of each country. Western Europeans do indeed tend to see Eastern European Catholics as representing an authoritarian, politicised approach to religious affiliation which jars with the Church's carefully nurtured place in the pluralistic West. There is still some way to go until Europe is able to 'breathe with both lungs'.

Discussion

Sidney Shipton spoke of moves afoot to organise an interfaith group in the UK to discuss the implications of EU expansion. John Kennedy observed that Poland was the largest and poorest country the EU would have absorbed and would double the number of agricultural workers in the EU, and that there was no prospect of changing the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) before Poland's accession. Jonathan Luxmoore said that he believed there was in fact no realistic prospect of Poland joining the EU by January 2004. If it did, Polish agriculture would simply be swallowed up by Germany or Scandinavia. Richard Seebohm said that many of the Eastern European candidate countries were already members of the Council of Europe, and that the contribution of their parliamentarians to the debates in Brussels was spectacular.