

## EU Expansion: a Mainly Political Perspective

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Before the fall of communism in 1989 there had been three successive EU enlargements which expanded membership from the original six countries (the Benelux countries, the Federal German Republic, France and Italy) to include a total of twelve. These enlargements involved: Britain, Denmark, Ireland; Greece; Portugal and Spain.

The collapse of communism in principle created a wholly new situation entailing the possibility of a major eastward expansion. The reunification of Germany and the consequent incorporation of the former GDR into the EU was a harbinger of subsequent opportunities and difficulties.

One relatively immediate consequence of communism's collapse was that the once 'neutral' countries, Austria, Finland and Sweden, were in 1995 accepted as full EU members. Their well developed market economies, strong civil societies and stable democratic systems made their accession relatively unproblematic. Some observers believe this may have been the last 'classic' EU expansion in that most other potential members present much more serious problems to the existing EU members - both because of their nature and because there are so many of them.

Most of the potential new members, for deepseated historical reasons, and because of their experience of communist rule, are for the most part significantly different from existing member states. They have relatively poor economies, often very dependent on agriculture, relatively weak civil societies, and new democratic institutions of uncertain stability. They have also inherited major environmental problems.

The problem of taking these countries on board has been complicated by the fact that the period of considering an eastward expansion has coincided with a period of 'deepening integration' amongst existing members. After a period of some paralysis in the 1980s new Franco-German initiatives led to such fresh developments as the Single European Act, European monetary union and the pioneering of some integration in the realms of justice and domestic affairs as well as foreign affairs and security. These developments made the accommodation of a substantial number of new members extra difficult.

In theory EU relationships with former communist countries could have been managed by new or already established pan-European bodies like the OSCE. But the only country really interested in that possibility was Russia. In practice joining the EU was the only option. There were indeed powerful reasons why former communist countries should invest most of their hopes in joining established Western European bodies (NATO as well as the EU). There were two sets of interlocking considerations. The first was the security issue: fear of Russia and also of destabilisation in the Balkans. The second was the economic aspect: in many cases the main motivation here was not so much the positive desire to be brought in as fear of being locked out.

Particularly for the postcommunist elites there was a sense of 'coming home' or rejoining the European 'mainstream'. There was also a widespread perception that EU membership would ultimately produce greater material prosperity, stabilise domestic institutions and enable the countries concerned to escape from the Russian sphere of influence. Russia itself, and other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, were from the earliest postcommunist days placed on a different footing by the EU. Formal links were established but from the outset it was made plain that in any foreseeable future EU membership in their case was not an option.

For other ex-communist countries the process of negotiating entry into the EU has been very protracted. January 2003 seems to be the earliest possible date for the first 'wave' of new entrants. The factors underlying such a delay include the following:

The EU itself is a complex institution which has to reconcile the views and interests of all existing member states, their major pressure groups and public opinion. Special political problems may arise for example when general elections have to be fought during negotiations and the relevant government may temporarily become more than usually inhibited. The 'deepening' versus 'widening' issue has also slowed up proceedings.

The sheer number and diversity of the applicant countries, and their own rivalries, has also been a difficulty. There has been some attempt at cooperation amongst applicant countries, notably adherents to the Visegrad group originally embracing Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, but these arrangements have at best had limited success.

The EU's rules require that member states unanimously accept the accession of new members, and the terms of their accession. Equally, all member states have to ratify the relevant agreements. Any one member state can consequently slow down the bargaining process.

A perhaps smaller but significant complication is that negotiations with ex-communist countries have coincided with negotiations involving other countries which, at least informally, may have begun before 1989. Cyprus, Malta and Turkey fall into this category.

Existing member states have tended in practice to adopt different approaches to the widening process in accordance with their own varying national interests or histories.

Germany has generally favoured an eastward expansion reflecting a concern for stability along its frontiers, and because it sees major economic opportunities in the same area. A perhaps incidental yet significant motive has been a sense of obligation to neighbours which have suffered as a result of past German involvements.

The UK (particularly under Conservative governments) has generally favoured expansion, but for very different reasons. It has seen expansion as a way of diluting the process of 'deepening' and the development of federalist tendencies.

France has generally been somewhat reserved about widening because it fears negative consequences for the EU's internal cohesion and, in particular, fears a shift in the balance of power inside the Union which will favour Germany and consequently place strains upon the Franco-German relationship which has traditionally supplied much of the 'motor power' behind moves toward greater integration. France has been correspondingly anxious that 'widening' will cut across its vision of a relatively united Europe capable of acting independently of the USA.

The Benelux countries generally share some of France's preoccupations. As relatively small countries they have a special stake in building up federal institutions capable of offering them some protected status and, in particular, of constraining German power.

The more southerly EU member states, Spain for example, have reservations about widening stemming from fears that as net recipients of EU resources they will lose out to newer and even poorer member states.

The Scandinavian countries have a particular historical, cultural and strategic interest in the accession of the neighbouring Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

On a different plane, Greece has a special interest in the accession of Cyprus and in all the factors likely to affect that development.

The applicant countries can in some cases, and for the sake of convenience, be grouped together. Each presents the existing EU with particular challenges and brings its own potentially disturbing historical baggage. In each case the relevant problems have complicated and hence slowed up negotiations.

Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland were, from the outset, 'at the head of the queue' to join the EU. They have throughout been likely to be amongst the first to satisfy EU criteria for entry. Not least they (particularly Poland) are the largest applicant countries in terms of population and so offer existing EU member states the prospect of relatively large new markets. The case of Czechoslovakia was, of course, complicated by the split between the Czechs and Slovaks. The economies of the two resulting countries are so intertwined that to negotiate with them separately is difficult. On the other hand Slovakia, especially under President Meciar, has a poor record in terms of political and human rights which has made that country a less acceptable bargaining partner than its Czech counterpart. The Czech, Slovak and Hungarian states also have problems concerning national minorities, which have caused additional complications. They too, along with Poland, have unresolved property disputes with Germany. For Poland the size of its agricultural sector is a problem. Its farmers have been anxious about the implications of EU membership. The question of the country's traditional Catholic culture and identity is a further background problem. Finally problems have arisen out of the communist legacy as it affects environmental standards.

The Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania present distinctive problems arising out of their relationships with Russia and the presence of Russian-speaking minorities in their midst. On the other hand Estonia in particular has developed relatively strong and stable political institutions.

Slovenia is the one former Yugoslav republic likely, in the relatively near future, to satisfy EU criteria. Indeed, it may have progressed significantly 'up the queue'. It has some unresolved issues especially vis a vis neighbouring Italy.

Bulgaria and Romania, from the EU's viewpoint, constitute more problematic cases. Their economic and political systems both present difficulties. The EU's preoccupation with stability in the Balkans may, however, strengthen their claims. Romania is assisted by the support of France which, for historical and cultural reasons, is particularly supportive of its claims.

Cyprus, in principle, could constitute a relatively clear-cut case, but the island's partition and quarrels between Greece and Turkey greatly complicate the issue. Some see a settlement of the whole question as a precondition for membership.

Malta's case has been complicated by internal party political divisions over the subject of membership. Its current government favours entry.

Turkey's case is by far the most problematic. Though its application has been on the table longer than any of the above it is the least likely to join the EU in any foreseeable future. The nature of its political institutions, the military's role in political life and its human rights record (particularly as it affects the Kurdish population) cast serious doubt on its credentials. There are also serious doubts about its European identity and vocation.

Faced with all the above the EU has had major problems in determining the suitability of applicants and prioritising among them. Outright rejection is rare, although Morocco received that treatment and in the process parameters were established. Typically, interim arrangements or associate status are granted. These may vary in nature but generally involve some degree of privileged access to EU markets and the possibility of some EU assistance (political, economic or technical) in bringing applicant countries closer into line with EU entry criteria. Within applicant countries such arrangements have sometimes been seen as a way of 'fobbing them off'.

Certainly such arrangements point to the wholly asymmetrical nature of the relevant bargaining relationships and the extent to which applicants are forced into the role of supplicants. Existing EU members, acting through the European Commission, determine and enforce the entry criteria to be met. The result is a significant degree of EU supervision over the affairs of applicant states.

The criteria to be met include the establishment of a viable liberal-democratic and competitive party political system committed to the European Convention on Human Rights; the creation of a functioning market economy; acceptance of all existing EU regulations (the *acquis communautaire*) and signing up to all established treaties governing EU affairs. In practice meeting such standards is far more difficult than meeting the entry requirements of, for example, the Council of Europe. A particular difficulty may be having to accept rules adopted after a membership application has been tabled but over which the applicant can exercise no immediate influence. The longer the bargaining process goes on the more the candidate countries will have to sign up to - and they have had no hand in shaping any of it.

Against this complex background negotiations have been tortuous and have frequently 'blown hot and cold'. The war in Kosovo, however, acted as a significant catalyst or impulse pointing to the need for greater certainty. In the backwash of that development significant moves were made toward the establishment of a timetable for entry, in the EU document Agenda 2000. There is now the possibility of entry, in 2003 or 2004, of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and possibly Slovenia. Cyprus and Malta may not be too far behind. The same may be true of Slovakia and the Baltic Republics. Eventually Romanian and Bulgarian accession can be anticipated. Already Macedonia and Albania have established relationships with the EU and ultimately Croatian and even Serbian entry cannot be precluded. Turkey remains an interesting but still very problematic case. The limit to all this is that the CIS states will be excluded - but this was known from the start.

Despite the above development major and still by no means resolved problems remain. So far as the existing EU itself is concerned, these include institutional questions which by common consent must be successfully tackled if the move from a Union of 15 members to well over 20 members is to be appropriately negotiated. Arrangements workable, if hard pressed, in one context will, it is agreed, not work adequately in the new context.

Reforms are indicated in the following areas, which are still under discussion:

Qualified majority voting in the Council of Ministers.

Determining the Union's presidency.

The European Commission's composition.

The structure of the EU's budget and the distribution of benefits and costs.

The Common Agricultural Policy, which accounts for a disproportionately large amount of EU expenditure and which needs changes which take account of the importance of agriculture to candidate members whilst restraining costs.

The Regional and Structural Funds which need to accommodate new members without unduly penalising existing beneficiaries.

Problems also remain which now and in the future are liable to complicate relationships between existing and possible new member states. These include

Agriculture. From the start candidate members, most notably Poland, have felt themselves to have been poorly treated by the EU which has been unwilling to open up its markets to their products. Any amount of financial assistance will not compensate for this. Political pressures to protect French and other farmers have fostered protectionist tendencies within the EU to the cost of applicant countries which depend heavily upon agriculture. In line with the Common Agricultural Policy: the EU spends 60 per cent of its budget on subsidising agriculture. There are thus big problems associated with bringing in more agricultural countries.

Mobility of capital and goods. This has been encouraged during the negotiation period, to the possible benefit of applicant countries but to the certain benefit of existing member states, and in particular of Germany. On the other hand candidate members fear that large sections of their economies will come to be controlled by Germans and others. Equally, their populations are subject to limitations on the mobility of labour enforced during lengthy transitional arrangements by existing EU member states fearful of the social and political consequences of large-scale immigration.

Environment. Relatively stringent environmental standards are being enforced upon candidate members which are in principle to be welcomed but which impose substantial additional costs upon already disadvantaged industries striving to become more competitive. Dealing with inefficient or unsafe nuclear installations is one particularly fraught example of this general problem.

Asylum seeking, organised crime, drug trafficking. Existing EU member states have concerns in these spheres which complicate relationships and place additional demands upon the sometimes underresourced state apparatuses of candidate members. There is widespread fear in the West of being swamped and destabilised.

In the longer run, and at an arguably deeper level, the whole question of enlargement raises farreaching issues concerning the direction and nature of the entire 'European project'. The debate on the balance between 'deepening' and 'broadening' is unresolved. These issues deserve lengthy consideration but here may be all too briefly summarised under the following headings.

Within the existing EU it is plausibly argued that there is a major 'democratic deficit', which without imaginative leadership is liable to become more pronounced within an enlarged Union. Perhaps serious attention needs to be paid by all concerned to the means whereby the EU and its leaders can (re)connect with its present and future citizens. Visionary thinking concerning the EU's institutions may be one aspect of this challenge.

One expression of the existing situation seems to be limited and probably falling support for enlargement among the electorates of existing member states. This is to some extent paralleled by growing nervousness amongst the electorates of candidate members as the possible costs of EU membership become clearer. Opinion formers on all sides need to address these problems on a long-term basis.

A long-term challenge for all present or future EU members may be the creation of a more evident and vibrant transeuropean civil society - a civil society which undergirds or constrains economic and political institutions and which also facilitates a widespread popular sense of 'owning' the European project. Communities of faith may have an especially significant and distinctive role to play in this sphere.

A currently significant problem which is liable to become more pronounced within an enlarged Union is that of nations fearing the erosion of their distinctive traditions and identities. Such anxieties can fuel centrifugal forces within the Union which, if not adequately accommodated, could undermine the whole project. Part of the answer might be the sensitive long-term nurturing of a European identity which transcends

but also happily coexists with other more localised identities. Again faith communities may face particular challenges and opportunities in this realm. Not least there are questions of divisions among Christians, as well as wider divisions, that acquire extra significance in this context.

It may be that an enlarged community will be characterised by varying degrees of integration among its member states. The whole question of 'variable geometry' and of a 'multi-speed Europe' arises. This might seem to cut across the idea of a relatively united Europe in principle able to act creatively at the global level in the interests of a more stable and just world. Amidst the whole enlargement process it seems very important not to become blinded to wider realities and responsibilities.