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➤ Hard-won but Vital: EU Enlargement in Historical Perspective

N. Piers Ludlow

Enlargement has become one of the defining features of the European integration process. This was neither foreordained nor predicted by those who drafted the Treaty of Rome between 1956 and 1957. The founding fathers mentioned the possibility of countries joining in the Treaty preamble. They also included Article 237, which provided more detail on the procedure for new countries to join. But nothing in the historical record indicates any realisation on their part of how central the expansion of the European Community (EC)/EU would be to the integration process. Still, in the sixty years of subsequent development, 'widening' has in many ways had the most dramatic impact on the process that the Treaty set in motion.

A CONSTANT ISSUE

The very first meeting of the European Commission in 1958 broached the issue of how the EC should relate to its neighbours – one of the agenda items at this meeting involved how to respond to the free trade area proposal advanced by the UK.¹ Within three years, the still fledgling EEC confronted its first actual membership applications when the UK, Ireland and Denmark (slightly later followed by Norway) submitted requests to join.² Greece and Turkey were also negotiating Association Agreements that explicitly referred to membership as the eventual outcome. In the decades that followed, few periods of community development have not had membership negotiations underway or under active consideration. These include a brief interlude in the 1960s, when the Labour government of Harold Wilson seemed to temporarily lose interest in UK membership; a couple of years after 1973 when Greece, Spain and Portugal were not in a position to apply; and a handful of years in the late 1980s when Spain and Portugal had joined, but the Cold War prevented the EFTA neutrals from doing so. On the whole, the prospect and reality of enlargement has become a fact of EC/EU life, and the task of both negotiating with prospective new members and accommodating those who have recently joined has become a truly Sisyphean endeavour. The 1973 decision by the European Commission to disband the 'enlargement taskforce' that had successfully completed the accession talks with the UK, Ireland, Denmark and Norway seems almost quaint in its inappropriateness in hindsight.³

Despite its centrality to the life and operation of the EC/EU, enlargement has never been easy and has seldom been regarded wholly positively by those already inside. The issue of who should belong to the EEC was arguably the most enduring and poisonous of the three great controversies of the integration process that divided Gaullist France from its five Community partners during the 1960s (the other two

1 Robert Lemaignan, *L'Europe au berceau; souvenirs d'un technocrate* (Paris: Plon, 1964), 7.

2 N. Piers Ludlow, *Dealing with Britain: The Six and the First UK Application to the EEC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). The name of the EC has evolved over the years, so that in some of the earlier allusions it is more appropriate to use the term European Economic Community or EEC. Where claims are made that refer to the whole of the period since 1958, EC/EU will be used.

3 David Hannay, interview, July 14, 2011.

were what the Community should do and how it should operate).⁴ A resolution only arrived at the Hague Summit of 1969 when President Pompidou broke the EEC's near paralysis brought about by *la question anglaise* and set out to allow enlargement negotiations to begin in return for promises that completion and deepening would come with widening. A similar process of internal Community agonising took place in the 1970s over how to respond to the membership bids from Greece, Portugal and Spain. The Council of Ministers – despite that many of the individual member states shared the Commission's misgivings – almost immediately disowned the Commission's a disarmingly honest 1976 opinion on Greek membership, which made clear that the Commission did not see Greece as ready to belong to the EEC.⁵ In the early 1980s, France obstructed Spain and Portugal's advance towards EEC membership in a fashion that resembled the behaviour of General de Gaulle towards UK membership a decade and a half before.⁶ The so-called *Giscardazo* of June 1980 may have fallen short of de Gaulle's January 1963 press conference in terms of lapidary prose, but it faced the same degree of fury by the Spanish press as by the British press following the 1963 and 1967 vetoes.

The arguments advanced against enlargement have also shown a strong degree of consistency over the years. One could easily interchange the 1967 French foreign minister's denunciation of enlargement from six to ten as something that would change the nature of the Community with a much more recent warning about the consequences of enlargement to 27 or beyond:

An economic community of this nature, in other words with all those members and all those associates, would inevitably be something very different to the Community we have built up until now and to which we have grown accustomed, different from a political point of view, and naturally from an economic point of view also... So, ineluctably, it would not just be an enormous increase in the size of the Community as it currently exists. It would be the appearance of something entirely new and which would have only a distant link to what we call European integration.⁷

These arguments have also recurrently voiced dire predictions of institutional paralysis, unacceptably high budgetary burdens, floods of cheap migrant labour (especially in the case of the Mediterranean applicants of the 1970s) and dangerous threats to existing policy priorities (in the case of the anticipated British challenge to the CAP).

Additionally, many Community insiders have voiced the conviction that the arrival of new members has significantly contributed to a slowing down and over-complication of the operation of the EC/EU. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the 'class of '73' took on an unfair blame for the 'Eurosclerosis' of the period. Britain was indeed a fairly turbulent new member, and Greece of Andreas Papandreou also took some effort to absorb, but the difficulties of that era had more varied and deeper-seated causes than the after-effects of enlargement – notably the global economic downturn after 1973. Likewise, the first decade of this century witnessed an equally unjust tendency to blame many Community woes on the after-effects of the 2004 'big bang' enlargement. Indeed, one of the few positive outcomes of the euro crisis was to demonstrate that a number of well-established EU members faced more dire problems than the more recent members and that few of the ongoing difficulties could be attributed to the 12 newest member states. Nevertheless, the tendency to blame the most recent arrivals and the deep-rooted nature of the (highly questionable) conviction of an inescapable trade-off between 'deepening' and 'widening' had already been confirmed.

4 N. Piers Ludlow, *The European Community and the Crises of the 1960s: Negotiating the Gaullist Challenge* (London: Routledge, 2006).

5 Eirini Karamouzi, *Greece, the EEC and the Cold War, 1974-79* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

6 Raimundo Bassols, *España en Europa: historia de la adhesión a la CE 1957-85* (Madrid: Política Exterior, 1995), 237–48.

7 Council of Ministers Archives, Brussels (CMA), I/4/67 (GB2).

WHY ENLARGEMENT?

Why has the EC/EU continued to expand? If enlargement is painful, divisive and liable to clog up the workings of the EC/EU machine, why has it not been avoided? Providing answers is more easily done in terms of why countries have wished to join than in terms of why the majority of applicants eventually found their way in.

From the point of the view of the applicants, three broad categories of reasons explain why countries decided to apply. The first and most obvious is economic. The potential attraction of greater commercial access to an extensive and wealthy market such as the EC/EU is considerable; the cost of exclusion from that same market is correspondingly high. Such calculations (albeit centred overwhelmingly on the booming German market rather than on those of other potential partners) underpinned the original Dutch impulse to propose what would become the EEC, and have recurred in slightly different forms for every subsequent wave of countries contemplating EC/EU membership.⁸ The attractions of access and the potential costs of exclusion have become greater as the market has grown.

A related, but slightly different set of considerations comes into play for those countries whose potential exports include agricultural produce. Whereas EC/EU policy is comparatively liberal in many industrial sectors, affording fairly decent export opportunities even to those countries that chose to remain outside the EC/EU, it has been highly protective of the agricultural sector from the outset. The gap in commercial prospects between insiders and outsiders has been greater in agriculture than in most industrial sectors, increasing the incentives for potential agricultural exporters to join the EC/EU. The Danes and the Irish felt such pressures in 1973, as did all three Southern European applicants in the 1970s and some of the entrants in 2004. The British, meanwhile, had a different (but also CAP-related) incentive to enter the EEC due to their sincere belief that they would have a greater ability to alter a policy they had disliked and denounced from its inception once they entered the EC/EU.⁹

The promise of substantial subsidies poses another potential attraction. This too is something that evolved considerably over time. Direct subsidies were not a big consideration in the early EEC, as there was next to no internal financial redistribution system. A country like Ireland could perhaps aspire to some useful income from the CAP, but on the whole the prospects of direct budgetary transfers did not factor in the calculations underpinning the first wave of membership applications. Since the latter half of the 1980s, however, the sums available for redistributive purposes within the EC/EU have expanded considerably. As a result, the prospect of receiving substantial sums from the EC/EU budget has become a powerful reason to join for countries poorer than the European norm. This was strongly underlined throughout the 1990s by the disparity between the sums of money flowing from the Community budget to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to the poorer existing member states (with the latter group receiving considerably more despite the fact that Greece, Spain, Portugal, southern Italy and Ireland all had a higher per capita wealth than most of the former Soviet bloc). The obvious lesson drawn from this somewhat perverse state of affairs was that it was better to be inside than outside the EC/EU.

A final set of economic calculations taken into consideration regards labour mobility. The expectations of several generations of applicants in this respect again echoed those of some of the founding members. Italy in particular was very conscious in the 1950s and 1960s of the potential benefits that might flow if the EEC facilitated the movement of unemployed workers to other parts of the Community.¹⁰ The potential gain, however, was not limited to the fact that once inside the EC/EU a country with high unemployment could encourage some of its surplus labour to migrate elsewhere in Europe. They also included the way in which

⁸ Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation-state* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁹ Michael Franklin, *Joining the CAP: The Agricultural Negotiations for British Accession to the European Economic Community, 1961-1973* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010).

¹⁰ Simone A.W. Goedings, *Labor Migration in an Integrating Europe: National Migration Policies and the Free Movement of Workers, 1950-1968* (Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers, 2005).

full EC/EU membership could improve the predicament of nationals who had already chosen to seek work elsewhere by improving their legal status, making it easier for their dependents to join them, facilitating their ability to transfer money and resources back home and providing them with full rights and benefits in their adopted country. After all, in most cases (and certainly in Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal) emigration rates to the rest of Europe were higher prior to Community membership than few years afterwards, since membership helped bring about a strengthening of the domestic economy that stemmed the migratory flow. The position of those who did choose to remain abroad improved considerably with their new status as Community nationals. Italian or Greek *Gastarbeiter* in Germany thus faced a much stronger position, legally and practically after 1958 and 1981 (respectively) than they did before their home countries joined the EC/EU.

The second major category of factors includes geo-strategic calculations. Some of these had a Cold War dimension, although paradoxically more countries have turned to the EC/EU out of the belief that membership would give them additional protection vis-à-vis Moscow since the end of the Cold War than before 1990. Cold War security concerns and the question of Western alignment were considerations for both the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy, but fears of the Cold War threat do not appear to have represented a major consideration for any pre-1990 applicant. Since that time, however, Finland, the Baltic states and several countries in the former Soviet bloc have all been partly motivated by concerns regarding residual dangers to their east, whether in the form of a revived Russia or an unstable post-Soviet maelstrom. The Greeks perceived their security gains from Community membership as more related to the threat from Turkey than from the Soviet Union. In the British case, the security-related case for EEC membership had less to do with the direct threat from the Soviet Union than from the fear, particularly acute in the early 1960s, that exclusion from a more politically united Europe might result in its marginalisation from the transatlantic security dialogue central to the Western cause in the Cold War. By the late 1960s, this underlying concern was flanked, if not surpassed, by the more positive calculation that involvement in (or leadership of) a Europe that managed to get its act together on foreign policy coordination could act as a powerful countervailing influence to the UK's decline as a global player.¹¹ Both variants clearly demonstrate the degree to which Britain's decision to opt for EEC membership represented far more than just an economic decision.

The third category covers a rather diverse range of political considerations that have encouraged countries to apply to the EEC. Perhaps the most basic of these was the belief, felt strongly by the Southern European applicants of the 1970s, and the Central and Eastern European applicants two decades later, that EC/EU membership would underline their return to the European mainstream. For a country like Spain, once a major player in European power politics, but semi-ostracised and cut-off from many developments in post-1945 Western Europe by the authoritarian nature of General Franco's regime, entering the EEC marked the moment when this period of isolation came to an end and it resumed its rightful place within Western Europe.¹² Likewise, for many countries formerly trapped within the Soviet bloc, EU membership became the embodiment of the 'return to Europe' that their populations had called for when the communist regimes fell. Even a country like Austria, democratic and prosperous long before joining the EU, could regard membership as a formal end to an anomalous state of neutrality thrust upon it by the Cold War.¹³ In all three cases, the symbolism of joining 'Europe' became as important – and perhaps more important – than any of the tangible benefits that EC/EU membership could bring.

Slightly more concrete (although also involving a strong element of symbolic politics) has been the hope that EC/EU membership could help consolidate fledgling democratic systems within aspiring member states. Europeanisation could buttress democratisation in at least three ways. First, linking back to the economic factors referred to above, it could bring a degree of prosperity or the promise of future prosperity, which

11 Edward Heath, *Old World, New Horizons: Britain, Europe, and the Atlantic Alliance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

12 Julio Crespo MacLennan, *Spain and the Process of European Integration, 1957-85* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

13 Michael Gehler and Rolf Steininger, eds. *Österreich und die europäische Integration: 1945-1993* (Köln: Böhlau, 1993).

would render a return to extremism less likely. Second, the target of EC/EU membership could provide a clear direction of travel (in recent times accompanied by an ever more explicit set of benchmarks and standards) for a country that might otherwise struggle to orient itself after throwing off a repressive regime. Third, the EC/EU included an element of conditionality in its promise of membership (implicit in the 1970s and early 1980s and more explicit since the early 1990s) that would provide a strong disincentive to diverge from the path of reform and democratisation. As several Central and Eastern European countries would discover in the course of the decade following the overthrow of Communist rule, any flirtation with undemocratic parties or leaders would result in raising a serious question mark about future EU membership.

A rather different political motivation proved critical to the decision to join by the former Cold War neutrals in the early 1990s. Sweden, Finland and Austria (not to mention Norway, which also applied but ultimately rejected membership) were all prosperous democracies with standards of living comparable, if not superior, to the EU norm. All four already enjoyed substantial access to the Single Market through the recently concluded European Economic Area (EEA) agreement. Yet, each was painfully aware that life on the edge of the EU (subject to its rules, but without the voice in Brussels decision-making that only full membership could bring) implied accepting that large amounts of its legislation would be determined by others who would not take Swedish, Finnish or Austrian concerns into account. Joining, as one Swedish diplomat put it, would thus bring to an end his country's status as 'a mail-box democracy'.¹⁴ Rather than a loss of sovereignty, it would constitute a gain.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF SAYING 'NO'

Why have existing member states acceded to the vast majority of membership requests submitted? After all, since 1958 they have only rejected one country (Morocco, largely on the grounds that it cannot be considered European) and have accepted 22 – and this took place despite the widespread grumbling and pessimistic predictions that accompanied virtually every single round of enlargement.

Part of the explanation has to do with the EC/EU's self-understanding as an entity designed to unify Europe. This has proven a constant feature of the integration process since 1950, regardless of the fact that only six countries, all confined to Western Europe, responded positively to Robert Schuman's invitation that year. From the very outset the six countries conceptualised their task as 'building Europe' and convinced others, notably the US, that this task was theirs to undertake. Their success in doing so, however, made it much harder for them to then turn around and deny entry to any other democratic European country economically advanced enough to cope with the integration process. General de Gaulle attempted precisely this, although his 14 January 1963 press conference rejecting UK membership tried to draw a contrast between continental Europeans and the UK, which by its geography, history, culture and international affiliations was *insulaire et maritime*. In effect, he suggested that the UK was not properly European.¹⁵ De Gaulle's attempt to exclude the UK faced such intense opposition and controversy that ultimately his vetoes and their aftermath underlined the near-impossibility of totally debarring a fellow European country from membership than contradicted it.

Another lesson of the 1960s battles over British membership, namely the potential divisiveness of struggles over enlargement, also encouraged a second trend that ultimately made it more likely for new countries to join. This trend was the tendency to resort to 'objective' criteria, whether economic or political, rather than make 'subjective' and contentious decisions on who did or did not belong. The instinctive reaction of both the member states and the Commission when confronted with membership applications became to say 'yes' provided the fulfilment of conditions x, y and z. As countless applicants have found, meeting such conditions

¹⁴ Comment made at a Centre for European Policy Studies seminar, 1994

¹⁵ Charles de Gaulle, *Discours et messages. 4. Pour l'effort. Août 1962 - Décembre 1965* (Paris: Plon, 1970), 61–75.

was not necessarily easy or painless. But the corollary of such an approach was it became impossible to say 'no' to a country that met the conditions (or at the very least had made substantial progress towards meeting them). The tactics adopted in response to enlargement applications thus combined with the fundamental nature of the EC/EU's self-identity to make the permanent rejection of other European countries extremely unlikely to occur.

It was also the case that many European statesmen, when faced with problems of transition (whether in the south of Europe in the 1970s or two decades later in the east), tended to make promises about eventual EC/EU membership that they later felt obliged to fulfil. This appears to have applied to both the Germans vis-à-vis the Spanish, and quite possibly to Giscard d'Estaing vis-à-vis Konstantinos Karamanlis, the Greek Prime Minister. Such promises only increased the pressure on the Community to deliver once the transition processes had advanced sufficiently. European statesmen also became aware that to snatch away the prize of membership from applicants could destabilise would-be members and jeopardise the whole democratisation process. Roy Jenkins, for instance, warned the European Council in October 1977 that 'the Commission believes that any reply which we might give to the candidate countries which rejected their applications, even implicitly or indirectly, would not be acceptable. A straight refusal would be a severe blow to the fragile democratic regimes which have emerged with the open encouragement of the Community and which are already to some extent dependent on us'.¹⁶

Finally, enlargement has developed a degree of momentum as it has progressed. Individual member states have no interest in finding themselves within a multilateral Community with a new partner whose application they may have opposed or delayed. Once a prospective candidacy gets to a point where actual entry becomes likely, a significant part of the opposition tends to soften and member states, particularly if they hold important offices, have instead found themselves competing to advance the enlargement dossier during their period in charge and engaging in declaratory diplomacy designed to convince themselves and their publics that further Community expansion will prove beneficial after all. This happened with Greece in the late 1970s, and it clearly also happened in the latter stages of the negotiations with the Central and Eastern European applicants in the early years of this century.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The EC/EU has tended to expand regardless of the initial misgivings felt by many of its existing members. The process has often taken much longer and has proven more painful than the applicants expected. The thirteen years that elapsed between the first applications of the UK, Ireland and Denmark was followed by six years for Greece, nine for Portugal and Spain and over a decade for most of those who joined in 2004. The doubts and hesitations of insiders about the enlargement process have tended to manifest themselves in procrastination and delay rather than in outright refusal. Still, in most cases the process has resulted in membership, with the sole exceptions of Norway (whose own population twice decided against the offer of membership), Morocco (which had little plausible claim to be European) and Turkey (whose ambiguities have left the country in a state of limbo).

There is not much evidence that expansion has impeded the development of the EC/EU. In fact, the opposite is true. The development of new policy areas have been encouraged by the way in which new members have added their priorities and needs to those of the existing member states – financial redistribution, for instance, would not have developed as far as it has without the influx in 1973, 1981 and 1986 of a series of countries

¹⁶ European Commission Historical Archives, Statement by President Jenkins at the Council, Luxembourg, 18 October 1977.

¹⁷ Peter Ludlow, *The Making of the New Europe: The European Councils in Brussels and Copenhagen 2002* (Brussels: EuroComment, 2004).

substantially poorer than the Community norm. Also, new member states have obliged the EC/EU to give greater weight to areas of the world it previously tended to neglect. British membership vastly expanded the number and geographical spread of Community associates; Iberian membership reinforced ties with Latin America and Lusophone Africa; the entry of Central and Eastern European states compelled the Community to further develop its policy towards the regions beyond the enlarged EU's Eastern border. More importantly, enlargement has helped prevent any of the existing member states from deciding that Europe offers too little opportunity and from turning their gaze elsewhere. The significance of this point can perhaps be gauged by asking whether any of the original six countries – and Germany first and foremost – would be wholly content if their institutional and commercial ties remained confined to the five countries with whom they originally joined. That the answer is clearly 'no' is in itself the best retort to those who dwell excessively on the disadvantages that enlargement has supposedly brought and overlook its evident merits. ■