Eastern Enlargement of the EU: a Topsy-Turvy Endgame or Permanent Disillusionment

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Abstract

The Treaty of Nice (2001) strongly protects the interests of the current 15 European Union member countries. The new voting structure in the enlarged European Union preserves the existing members blocking influence over new policies. In addition, there is a cap on the Union's total expenditure. It is on these terms that the European Union is ready to enlarge eastwards. Eight countries with economies in transition (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and two market economies (Cyprus and Malta) are due to join the European Union in 2004. Bulgaria and Romania may follow, but not before 2007. The final operational entry conditions set by the European Councils in Brussels and in Copenhagen (2002) are such that this enlargement may be relatively cheap for the European Union in financial terms, but much costlier and slower for the accession countries than expected by politicians, both in the European Union and in the accession countries. The reasons for this include the self-imposed limits on European Union expenditure and the increasingly stringent standards that come from the ever-growing acquis communautaire that are costly to introduce, implement and enforce, but enlargement will take place for political reasons.

1 Un ringraziamento particolare va a Marina Rossi per il suo valido contributo, mai richiesto ma sempre presente. I have benefited from discussions with many friends and colleagues, but I owe special gratitude to Victoria Curzon Price, as well as to Lisa Borgatti, Eckhard Freyer, Maurice Guyader, Jong Eun Lee, Marinette Payot, Martin Pontzen, Franco Praussello and Pia Weber. Statistical material from Eurostat was kindly supplied by Jarko Pasanen and Wayne Codd. James Wiltshire kindly edited the text and provided a number of valuable suggestions. An earlier version of this article was published in the Economia Internazionale in 2000.

The views expressed are my own and do not reflect the position of the organisation for which I work.

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I. Introduction

The objective of this article is to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the enlargement of the European Union (EU). Eight countries with economies in transition, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, and two market economies, Cyprus and Malta, concluded terms for full membership with the EU from May 2004. Bulgaria and Romania may join the EU in 2007. Turkey is mentioned and referred to in this article only as a potential candidate for entry negotiations.

This article begins by looking at the strategic priorities of the EU. It then examines the economic structure of the accession countries. Entry criteria and the costs and benefits of EU enlargement are analysed in separate sections. This is followed by certain reflections about the disillusionment on both sides of the story regarding the imminent enlargement. The conclusion is that the final operational entry conditions set by the European Council in Brussels (2002) are such that this enlargement may be relatively cheap for the European Union in financial terms, but much costlier and slower for the accession countries than expected by politicians, both in the European Union and in the accession countries. The reasons for this include the voting rules in the enlarged EU, self imposed limits for the EUs

2The Treaty of Accession was signed in Athens on 16 April 2003.

3Although it has never been the public position of the EU, there are influential voices that reflect serious privately expressed anxiety of many officials that the EU is storing up trouble by embracing Turkey. The worry is that if Turkey enters the EU, then the biggest EU country could be South-east European. For example, a prominent Christian Democrat in the European Parliament, Wilfried Martens, said that, The EU is in the process of building a civilisation in which Turkey has no place. In addition, eminent Dutch politicians have expressed doubts about the Turkish application because there are too many of them, and they are too poor - and they are Muslims (The Economist, 15 March 1997, p. 31). Or, Valéry Giscard dEstaing, Chairman of the Convention on the Future of Europe, said that Turkeys membership would represent the end of the European Union… Those who are pushing hardest for the enlargement in the direction of Turkey are adversaries of the EU’ (The Financial Times, 8 November 2002). The European Council in Copenhagen (2002) decided that it would decide in December 2004 if Turkey fulfils conditions for the start of entry negotiations. However, a former senior American official declared that ‘the US has done everything but slap the German government across the face in an effort to get the EU to agree to Turkish membership’ (The Financial Times, 2 February 2003).