

'In two years' time, the Nine will be Ten' from La Libre Belgique (22 December 1978)

Caption: On 22 December 1978, the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique gives an account of the preparatory process for Greece's application for accession to the European Communities and provides an initial assessment of the diplomatic negotiations.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 22.12.1978, n° 356; 95e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Les Neuf seront dix d'ici deux ans", p. 1; 20.

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The way is clear for Greece to join the Community

In two years' time, the Nine will be Ten

At the beginning of 1981 at the latest, the European Community will have about nine million more citizens: nothing now stands in the way of Greece shortly becoming the 10th member of the European Community.

During a marathon session — it started on Wednesday morning and lasted until Thursday just after dawn — the European Foreign Ministers and the Greek negotiators reached agreement, thanks to concessions on both sides, on how to remove the remaining obstacles to Greek accession to the European Community. They reached agreement on the duration of the transitional period (five years, with some exceptions) for agricultural products and on the free movement of workers.

This meeting of the Council of Ministers thus marks the end of the final accession negotiations between the Nine and Athens. The Treaty of Accession with Greece will undoubtedly be signed next March. It will then have to be ratified by the parliaments of the nine current Member States of the Community.

Greece will then become the fourth state (after the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark) to swell the ranks of the six founding members of the European Community. In its wake, two other 'Mediterranean' states, Portugal and Spain, have also begun the process that will culminate in their eventual accession. In more than one respect, the problems posed by Greece are very different from those posed by the applications for accession submitted by Lisbon and Madrid.

Greece actually has a background of 16 years of association with the Community. When it signed the Association Agreement on 9 July 1961, it was the first European country to establish such close links with the Six. This Treaty of Association — which came into force on 1 November 1962 — explicitly provided for consideration of Greek accession in due course; it also included various objectives designed to bring the two parties closer together. The Agreement provided for a Customs Union to be established by 1984 and harmonisation of the policies of the Community and Greece (with particular regard to agriculture, the free movement of workers, transport, taxation, rules on competition and economic policy) in exchange for financial aid to Greece.

This attempt to bring the two parties closer together was, of course, seriously thwarted during the dictatorship of the Colonels. Between 1967 and 1974, the Community suspended the Treaty of Association — for which the Greeks were subsequently grateful. This setback certainly disrupted the development of joint activities and the harmonisation of policies, especially in agriculture.

Nevertheless, the Association did enable very close contacts to be established between Athens and the other European capitals and, to some extent, the gap that existed between the European and Greek markets to be bridged.

Immediately after the fall of the Colonels, the Greek Prime Minister, Konstantinos Karamanlis, made it known that he wanted Greece to join the Community as soon as possible. On 12 June 1975, Greece officially sought entry to Europe. On 28 January 1976, the European Commission delivered its opinion: it recommended a 'very positive' response, but it also advocated that a 'pre-accession period' should be introduced with a view to resolving certain economic problems. This recommendation naturally caused uproar in Greece, where it was felt that the previous period of Association should be duly taken into account.

On 9 February, the Council of Ministers dismissed the idea of a 'pre-accession period' and gave the 'green light' for accession negotiations, which officially opened on 27 July 1976. Early this year, negotiations entered their final phase. It was these substantive discussions that ended Thursday morning.

The negotiating process was, therefore, rather slow. However, on the whole, the issues to be settled were not

particularly difficult. The negotiators managed, moreover, to find common ground without any major problems on subjects as diverse as capital flows, the customs union in the industrial sector, the peaceful use of nuclear energy, coal and steel, and common foreign policy issues.

It is now clear that, in just over 15 years, Greece had made great strides towards Europe: from 1962 to 1977, the Greek gross national product increased on average by 6.5 % per annum, compared to 3.8 % in the Nine. The Greek rate of growth was also much higher than that of the Community: 6.1 % from 1965 to 1975 compared to 3.5 %. Even if Greece still lags well behind some industrialised nations, it is still making substantial progress, as witnesses the rapid growth in its manufacturing industry. Greek industry is not a threat to the 'sensitive' sectors in the Community. The fairly lengthy transitional period designed to bring the economies more into line with each other was, therefore, unnecessary.

Agriculture was a more difficult area: the agricultural sector employs more than 24 % of the Greek workforce and accounts for 15 % of GNP, against respectively 9 % and 5 % in the Community. However, since the volume of agricultural production is comparatively small (Greek exports account for less than 1 % of Community production), Greek agriculture is actually complementary rather than competitive, except of course for what are known as 'Mediterranean' products, such as olive oil, fruit and vegetables, and wine.

It was in order to try and settle this issue that the Nine met the Greek representatives on Wednesday. The two sides disagreed on the length of the transitional period. Initially, the Community wanted a transitional period of eight years, Greece wanted five.

A compromise was finally reached: Athens secured a five-year transitional period for most agricultural products, notably wine and olive oil, which account for 12 % of Greek agricultural production. The Nine secured one important concession: the transitional period for peaches and both fresh and processed tomatoes would last seven years. This longer period was required to stop Greece from flooding the Common Market with cheap peaches and tomatoes that would prove ruinous for French and Italian producers.

The other major problem involved the transitional period for the free movement of Greek workers. The Nine (especially the Germans) said seven years, the Greeks five.

In this instance, it was the Greeks who made the concessions: free movement, one of the basic principles of the Treaty of Rome, would not apply to Greek workers until seven years after accession, i.e. in 1988 at the latest. The Community agreed that it would give priority to Greece if the current Member States needed to recruit workers.