

'EEC enlargement speeded up?' from Le Soir (8 December 1992)

Caption: On 8 December 1992, commenting on the Swiss refusal, in a referendum, to ratify the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA), the Belgian daily newspaper Le Soir speculates on the EEA's chances of success, particularly in the light of the enlargement process taking place in the European Communities.

Source: Le Soir. 08.12.1992, n° 286; 106e année. Bruxelles. "L'élargissement de la CEE accéléré?", auteur:Riche, André , p. 6.

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EEC enlargement speeded up?

As Switzerland licks its wounds after the 'No' vote, the Twelve rethink enlargement.

Why persist with the European Economic Area (EEA)? The question was not raised directly at yesterday's meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Twelve in Brussels, but it was implicit in certain official comments — notwithstanding Willy Claes's assertion that there was a 'general desire to implement the agreement'.

The countries in the EFTA camp would like to save the EEA, but Switzerland's rejection means renegotiating certain provisions and repeating the ratification procedures. Norway, Sweden, Finland and Austria had already ratified the Treaty: they will have to start all over again. That leaves Iceland and Liechtenstein. The latter will be holding a referendum next Sunday, for which a negative outcome is already predicted. Of the Twelve, only Ireland had completed ratification. As for Belgium, its Parliament was to start the process today.

Some of Switzerland's EFTA partners must be grinding their teeth when they recall the marathon negotiating sessions so frequently complicated by Berne's demands. Sweden and Austria, in particular, saw the EEA as merely a transitional stage towards EEC accession, for which they have already officially applied. They accordingly made only modest demands. Switzerland, on the other hand, was not yet an applicant for EEC accession and wanted a reassuring Treaty, even at the cost of very tough negotiations.

Several EEC Member States, especially the poor southern countries, argued yesterday that certain sections of the Treaty would have to be revised following Switzerland's defection. The Spaniards were saying that the balance of the agreement had been disrupted, while the Portuguese were complaining that workers from the Twelve would now be unable to enter the Swiss labour market. In addition, the EFTA countries were to contribute to a fund designed to benefit the EEC's poorer southern members, so the contribution scale will now have to be amended. Finally, special agricultural concessions had been granted to the southern countries so as to allow them to export more freely on the EFTA market. That provision, too, will have to be revised.

Given the delay caused by renegotiation — estimated at anything from six months to a year — some Community diplomats were asking yesterday whether an EEA Treaty would still serve any useful purpose, especially as five of the seven EFTA countries have officially applied for EEC accession and the enlargement process could be speeded up. Last week, Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand set the end of 1993 as the date for completion of the enlargement negotiations.

Two conditions still need to be met in order for negotiations to begin: ratification of Maastricht by the Twelve and agreement on EEC budget planning (the Delors Package). Nothing that the Foreign Ministers did yesterday affected those conditions. Only a summit of the Heads of State can alter them, so any change to the doctrine will have to wait until Edinburgh at the end of the week. That did not, however, prevent the 12 Foreign Ministers from discussing the technical arrangements for the enlargement negotiations at yesterday's meeting or from hinting that accession negotiations could begin rapidly with Sweden, Austria and Finland.

Norway's application, however, which was lodged on 24 November, will need several months' assessment by the Commission before it can be considered.

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