

'EU sets the seal on enlargement to 25 Member States' from Le Monde (17 April 2003)

Caption: In this article, the French daily newspaper Le Monde summarises the most important addresses given at the ceremony held to mark the signing, on 16 April in Athens, of the Treaty of Accession to the European Union of 10 new Member States.

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EU sets the seal on enlargement to 25 Member States

Although anxious not to spoil the party by drawing attention to what divides them, several Heads of State or Government mentioned Iraq. Jacques Chirac repeated his warnings to the countries of Eastern Europe.

On Wednesday 16 April, in Athens, the European Union set the seal on its historic enlargement to encompass 25 Member States with the official signing of a voluminous 5 000-page treaty setting out the terms for unification of a continent riven by centuries of wars.

Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis greeted his 24 counterparts individually at the Stoa of Attalos, a colonnaded building with a view across the agora, the commercial, political, cultural and religious centre of ancient Athens. The Heads of State or Government of the 25 nations then climbed one by one up to the podium where they spoke for three minutes each before signing the Accession Treaty.

All were unstinting in their use of superlatives. ‘This is a historic day,’ declared Costas Simitis in his opening address. ‘Here, in this ancient agora, 2 500 years ago, people of different cultures and nationalities met to debate. It is a place where we can recognise that history does not end. This is the continuity of history.’ German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder compared the occasion with the fall of the Berlin Wall as a day ‘for sharing our joy — the joy of creating a genuinely united and peaceful Europe with excellent economic and political prospects.’

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who had chaired the Copenhagen Summit in December at which the accession negotiations were concluded, saluted the courage shown by the people of the countries of Eastern Europe. A long-standing advocate of enlargement, he declared, ‘Our new Europe was made possible by the will of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, brave men and women who rose up against oppression and fought for their freedoms and their democratic rights.’ For French President Jacques Chirac, it was a day that ‘brought the realisation of a tremendous hope.’

The leaders of the countries of East Europe, whose 75 million inhabitants will join the 380 million Europeans already within the 15-state Union, were not to be outdone. ‘We have rebuilt Europe’s spiritual identity,’ said Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, ‘for it is not so long ago that our continent suffered two major wars and was torn apart by the divisions of the Cold War.’ His Hungarian counterpart, Péter Medgyessy, also struck an emotional note: ‘If only my mother and father had still been alive to see this dream realised.’

Reference to divisions of opinion on Iraq

The only discordant note in the enthusiastic chorus was struck by Greek Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos who voiced his regret that only part of Cyprus was to join the European Union, following the failure of talks with the Turkish Cypriot community. ‘I regret that the artificial barriers of the division and the demarcation line imposed upon us through force should have prevented our Turkish Cypriot compatriots from joining at the same time as us,’ he said.

Although anxious not to spoil the party by drawing attention to their divisions of opinion over Iraq, several of the Heads of State or Government did allude to them in Athens. Jacques Chirac, who drew the ire and reproof of the applicant countries in February when he called them to order for having sided with the United States over the Iraq crisis, repeated his warnings, albeit less harshly. ‘The European Union is not merely a large market, it is not merely common policies, a single currency or an area of free movement,’ he said. ‘It is, above all, a collective ambition, shared discipline, an affirmation of solidarity and the desire to turn, in a natural way, to the European family.’ He cautioned that, ‘with 25 Member States, even more so than with 15, no one can afford to play truant from Europe,’ and insisted on ‘the rights and duties of all in the 25-Member State Union.’

Aleksander Kwaśniewski, a faithful ally of the United States, took the opposite tack, emphasising the importance of the strategic alliance between the two shores of the Atlantic. ‘We want Europe to be based on reasoned trans-Atlantic ties,’ explained the Polish President.

In the centre of Athens, just a few hundred yards from the Acropolis, some 3 000 anti-war demonstrators, according to police estimates, or 6 000 according to the Greek media, gathered in the late morning to protest at the presence of Tony Blair, José María Aznar and their Italian counterpart Silvio Berlusconi — guilty in the demonstrators' eyes for having supported the United States. The demonstration failed, however, to attract the tens of thousands that its organisers had hoped to mobilise.

The Greek Government had taken unprecedented security measures, deploying more than 10 000 police officers and virtually sealing off the city centre. The police reported that there had been a few isolated incidents and that several dozen demonstrators had been taken in for questioning.

With Reuters and AFP