

Events leading up to the fourth enlargement of the European Union

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/events_leading_up_to_the_fourth_enlargement_of_the_european_union-en-1dff1d89-96dc-4c10-8245-251abea033af.html



Last updated: 08/07/2016

Events leading up to the fourth enlargement of the European Union

The creation of the EEA in 1992 was particularly driven by the desire to avoid — while allowing them to join the single market of the Twelve — the accession to the European Union of mostly neutral countries that might have delayed the drawing up of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP). Yet the rationale for the EEA soon evaporated. On the one hand, the Member States of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) which belonged to the EEA and which were going to have to apply some of the rules of the Common Market did not want to remain excluded from the decision-making process and preferred to accede to the EU. On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 made neutrality, hitherto justified by the opposition between the Eastern and Western blocs, a relative concept.

On 14 July 1989, Austria submitted its application for accession. It was followed by Sweden on 1 July 1991, Finland on 18 March 1992, Switzerland on 20 May 1992 (which withdrew its application following its rejection of the EEA) and, finally, by Norway on 24 November 1992. The latter, which, in a referendum held on 25 November 1972, had already refused to ratify the Accession Treaty that it had signed in Brussels on 22 January 1972, did not want to be isolated from its Nordic neighbours on this occasion. Iceland did not consider accession to the European Union to be necessary on the grounds that the economic benefits derived from membership of the EEA were sufficient.

For their part, the Twelve looked favourably on the accession of the applicant countries, as they were all democratic, their standard of living was high and they would therefore, in theory, have less need for Community subsidies. The Maastricht European Council on 9 and 10 December 1991 decided that negotiations for accession to the EU, as prescribed by the recent draft Treaty on European Union, could begin once the Community had concluded its negotiations on own resources and related issues in 1992. However, the problem then arose of strengthening the structures of the EU so that it could cope with an increase in the number of Member States. In April 1990, a joint letter to the Council Presidency from François Mitterrand, President of the French Republic, and the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, emphasised this necessity. The European Commission, instructed to draw up a draft proposal, could not reach an agreement, and nor could the Member States, which were divided into large and small countries on the issue of the weighting of their representation.

The applicant countries, on the other hand, did not want the institutions of the EU to be reformed before their accession, as they would be unable to participate in the reform. After the Danish 'No' vote on the Maastricht Treaty on 2 June 1992, the hard-won ratification in France on 20 September, the European Monetary System crisis which began on 17 September and a wave of 'Euro-scepticism', the Twelve agreed that it would be wise not to continue the discussion on institutional reform or to wait for the end of the ratification process of the Treaty on European Union before proclaiming the successful accession of the new Member States. The Edinburgh European Council held on 11 and 12 December 1992, under the Presidency of the UK, decided that enlargement negotiations would begin in early 1993. The Brussels European Council of 29 October 1993 set an accession date of 1 January 1995. The institutions of the EU would remain unchanged until the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC), scheduled in the Treaty of Maastricht for 1996, established a new treaty, which was signed in Amsterdam on 2 October 1997 by the Foreign Ministers of the Fifteen.