

'Welcome to the club' from the Luxemburger Wort (30 April 2004)

Caption: On 30 April 2004, the leader in the daily newspaper Luxemburger Wort welcomes the historic enlargement of the European Union to encompass 25 Member States and retraces the steps accomplished by the ten new Member States along the road to accession.

Source: Luxemburger Wort. Für Wahrheit und Recht. 30.04.2004. Luxemburg: Imprimerie Saint-Paul. "Willkommen im Club", auteur:Werle, Gerd , p. 3.

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Welcome to the club

1 May 2004: The accession of ten new countries, eight of them in Eastern Europe, marks a new convergence of European history and geography. The Athens Declaration of the Heads of State or Government, symbolically delivered in April last year at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens, the cradle of European democracy, aptly describes the forthcoming event as an indication of Europeans' determination to put an end to 'centuries of conflict and to transcend former divisions on our continent.'

The current enlargement is the fifth and largest in the Community's 50-year history. The six founder states were on their own until 1973, when the United Kingdom, Denmark and Ireland joined. 1981 and 1986 brought enlargement 'to the south', with the accession of Greece, Spain and Portugal. In 1995, enlargement to the north followed, with the accession of Finland and Sweden, together with Austria. But now we have a new round of enlargement, with the inclusion of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus. Bulgaria and Romania are expected to join in 2007, and further applications are already on the table from Turkey, Switzerland (now placed on the back burner) and Croatia. This magnetic attraction is the best indication that Europe cannot be doing so badly after all!

Enlargement to the east is regarded as the best-prepared round of accessions to date. The new Member States have (had) to transpose the body of EU legislation, all 80 000 pages of it, into their national law. After 50 years of existence, the Union is now much more than just an economic grouping. It has evolved into a close-knit political and social network. In addition to the free movement of goods, services and capital, free movement of persons and freedom of establishment have also become a matter of course. The EU is also in the process of creating a common area of justice and solidarity.

Enlargement to the east is a *sine qua non*, for more than reasons of moral obligation. For decades, the Eastern Europeans were ruled by others, deprived of democratic freedoms. Their applications to join the EU were born of the desire to have a slice of the cake, too. We should not blame them for this, since earlier enlargements were also the result of entirely materialistic aspirations.

On the other hand the older Member States have a clear economic interest in the Eastern European market. They have security concerns and are, not least, keen to ward off a major wave of immigration. This meant giving the Eastern Europeans enough incentives to stay put in their own countries. And yet the scale of Western 'development aid' is comparatively modest. For the period 2000–2006, the sum earmarked for all the applicant countries for infrastructure, modernising their agriculture and improving their competitiveness is just EUR 22 000 million. Truly a modest amount compared with the sums which the Community of Fifteen spends each year on its own structural policy and agriculture.

The EU did not make it too easy for its new Member States, and, as early as 1993, it set the bar for accession very high at the Copenhagen Summit. Admission to the club would not be possible until the Copenhagen criteria were met. These included stability of institutions, with a multiparty system, functioning political institutions and the rule of law. (In December, these criteria will be applied to Turkey.) A functioning market economy was deemed essential. The new members have, for the most part, completed the radical transition from a planned to a market economy by their own efforts. They have also had to accept the club rules, that is to say they cannot expect any additional favours. In return the applicants were allowed to attend the Convention and the Intergovernmental Conference on the EU Constitution.

Once the applicants had passed the Copenhagen 'test', a decision was taken at the December 1997 Luxembourg Summit to open accession talks with five countries. Two years later, talks began with the Helsinki Group. Who would be admitted first, and who would have to wait? December 2002 saw the second Copenhagen Summit, at which a definite date of 1 May 2004 was agreed for the admission of ten applicants. The way was finally cleared in April 2003 when the European Parliament gave the green light by voting in favour of the various countries. Referendums were held in the accession countries (apart from Cyprus). Following last Saturday's vote, in which the Greek Cypriots rejected the UN's reunification plan for the divided island, only the southern part of Cyprus becomes a Member State of the Community. The European Commission is not alone in feeling let down by the Greek Cypriots.

In the accession countries, the initial euphoria has given way to increasing scepticism. The old demons have been banished, it is true, but it will not be raining manna from heaven on 1 May. Return to the European fold will be accompanied instead by fierce economic competition. At the same time, those hitherto at the bottom of the EU prosperity league fear that they may lose their highly prized advantages when it comes to redistributing the millions on offer from the structural and agricultural funds. Portugal, Spain and Greece are hardly wealthy, but Estonia, Poland and Hungary are poor by comparison.

And what does the public think? In the old EU, there are widespread irrational fears of an influx of cheap labour, company relocations to the east or organised crime. Similar fears surfaced in the wake of earlier enlargements, too, but they proved unfounded. Quite simply, this is the age-old human fear of things alien, new, unknown, different, which goes back to the Stone Age. It is likely to prove groundless.

Many eurosceptics are unable to see the wood for the trees. Notwithstanding all the scepticism, criticism and problems which will undoubtedly follow from enlargement to the east, we should not lose sight of this positive historic 'event': the reunification of our ancient continent. The European family is now a bigger family; reason enough to celebrate on 1 May!

Gerd Werle