

‘Eneko Landaburu: We must be patient with the new Member States' from La Libre Belgique (26 April 2004)


Caption: A few days before the historic accession of 10 new Member States to the European Union on 1 May 2004, Eneko Landaburu, Director-General of Enlargement at the European Commission, talks to the Belgian daily newspaper La Libre Belgique.

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Accession guru Eneko Landáburu: ‘We must be patient with the new Member States’

- **The Spaniard is currently Director-General of External Relations at the Commission.**
- **His challenge is gradually to equip Europe with a foreign and defence policy.**

Christophe Lamfalussy

For three years, Eneko Landáburu conducted the accession negotiations with the ten countries which will accede to the Union on 1 May. Currently Director-General of External Relations at the European Commission, this Spanish Socialist and close associate of Javier Solana speaks unaccented French. From his office in the Charlemagne Building, he has a view overlooking the ‘European quarter’ and the Rue de la Loi tunnel.

Mr Landáburu, did you ever doubt that these ten countries would accede?

I had serious concerns at two stages, the first of which was during the first half of 2000, when I saw how impatient and frustrated the applicant countries had become. In Warsaw and Budapest alike, Chirac and Kohl had promised that the applicant countries would accede in 2000. The tension was lifted when we issued a ‘road map’. My second cause for concern arose at the height of the negotiations, just before the Copenhagen Summit, when I saw that Poland was making and insisting on some very strong demands. I wondered whether it might all go terribly pear-shaped.

Was such a major enlargement necessary?

As far as the preparation stage was concerned, there were not enough differences between the countries concerned — with the exception of Romania and Bulgaria — to divide them up into separate groups. We still have a problem at all events, whether we have six or ten new countries, in that we have not managed to achieve closer integration within Europe prior to its enlargement. Even in a Union of fifteen, the sense of family has been lost.

Do you regret the prospect of a partitioned country such as Cyprus acceding to the European Union?

Of course I do, because we thought that the negotiations with the Cypriot Government, recognised by the Member States as the island’s only administration, would provide an impetus for the possible reunification of the island.

Who at the Commission will be presenting the opinion on Turkey in October?

It will be presented by the Commission as a body, on the basis of our autumn report. It is impossible to second-guess the outcome, but already opinion has it that Turkey has made significant progress towards meeting the EU’s democratic standards. The important thing, in my view, is to relay a clear message to it: if we want to share our future in the Union with it, we must tell it so; however, we must also tell it as soon as possible if we do not want to. Slamming the door in its face after a lengthy negotiation process would be highly detrimental. Tensions in that case would run incredibly high.

So presumably you are expecting a decision to be announced at the December Summit?

Yes, that is what I am hoping for, given that it is a major decision that requires genuine debate.

On 1 May, the Union will have 450 million inhabitants. Does that mean that it will have a stronger presence on the international stage?

It wields greater influence simply by virtue of its enlargement. On the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, we shall number 500 million inhabitants. As the major global economic power, we produce some 25 % of the world’s wealth. We do not have any internal wars. However, our political influence externally is still lacking.

The level of integration that we have achieved is such that the next stage will be to consolidate and intensify measures in the field of foreign and defence policy.

The Constitution provides some options in that area, such as creating the post of EU Foreign Minister and ensuring the greatest possible coherence between the powers and responsibilities of the Commission and those of the Member States within the Council.

Surely that will take some time?

Of course it will; you see, the truth is that the larger countries have no desire to share sovereignty over the principal elements of foreign policy. They feel — and they do have a point here — that their vital interests are at stake, and they do not wish to be placed in the minority by a majority grouping of smaller countries. When it came to the war in Iraq, the division was dreadful, a case of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Although the vast majority of UN resolutions show that Europe is united, although we have concluded the Kyoto Protocol and given our full support to the International Criminal Court, we have not yet achieved our objective. But we must not give up hope.

Is moving too fast a problem?

In this connection, it is impossible to force on people something that they do not want. We live in a democracy. Unfortunately, perhaps, for us, you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make it drink. We must follow the example set by our founding fathers by setting ourselves some targets, explaining things clearly and demonstrating that each step further along the path of integration is beneficial to everyone.

Do you believe in the idea of forging an 'avant-garde'?

Yes, but on two conditions. First, the avant-garde must bring together a sufficient number of countries to make it a credible entity. Secondly, it must leave the door open for all those who wish to join it at a later stage. That is how the euro and Schengen were forged. The main thing is to refrain from parading ideas that are too restrictive. A number of *faux pas* have been made, for example, in the Franco-German axis. My own country, Spain, can never be an appendage to a French or German policy. It is sufficiently important to be a partner.

What will the new countries bring to the EU?

If one group forges ahead of the rest, it will be essential — to avoid a split — to ensure that new Member States — Hungary or the Czech Republic, for example — are involved. However, we must be patient with them: they have undergone major upheavals in order to adjust to our rules; they have regained their sovereignty, and they now should be allowed some time to digest accession. Some of these countries will know that the best way to defend their interests is to have an ambitious policy for European integration. The Poles are said to be pro-Atlantic ... Well, that goes without saying! After all, who got them into NATO? That was the United States, not the European Union. NATO was their priority, as you would expect. European culture will gradually take hold.