

'Enlargement: squaring the circle' from Libération (10 December 1994)

Caption: On 10 December 1994, commenting on the Essen European Council, the French daily newspaper Libération outlines the implications of the enlargement of the European Union to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs), with particular regard to the common agricultural policy (CAP) and structural aid to the most disadvantaged regions.

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Enlargement: squaring the circle

Jacques Amalric

The success of the Essen European Council will be judged, we are told, by the progress made towards enlargement of the Union to include the states of Central Europe. That is both true and false. True, because the meeting will mark, with some degree of ceremony, the setting aside of the strongest misgivings and reservations, and the acquiescence of all the Member States to the principle of extending democratic Europe to the East. False, because the problems to be solved are so complex that no formal decision can be expected in Essen, certainly not the establishment of a timetable for the accession of the best-placed candidates, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic — even if Germany has the year 2000 in mind.

It is one thing to say yes, with a firm nod of the head, to the principle of European enlargement; our accumulated guilty conscience about the successive uprisings repressed by the Soviet Union incites and obliges us to do so. As does history, which testifies to the existence of a truly European culture long before it was fashionable to talk about such things. It was history that enabled these nations, separated from the West for almost half a century, to preserve, for the main part, the memory of democracy and industry. That said, like it or not, we have to open the books of account and look at the figures and statistics. And what they tell us is far from encouraging — as even the Germans, who pushed so hard to overcome the reservations of France and a number of southern European countries, now readily admit.

Two problems are particularly thorny: the common agricultural policy (CAP) and structural aid for disadvantaged regions. Extending the common policies currently in force in the Union to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe would at least double the Community budget, which would leap from over 70 billion ecus to 150 billion (1 ecu = 6.5 francs). Clearly, no Member State is prepared to accept this. Britain, adopting its usual radical stance, is calling for abolition of the CAP — a common policy it has never been fond of — which would mean the rapid disappearance, among others, of French agriculture.

For their part, the Germans are in favour of a major reduction in agricultural subsidies and structural funds. The CDU's famous 'hard core' document says that 'a debate is needed on the long-term objectives of the CAP and the main features of Europe's future financial organisation'. That is likely to give rise to some heated clashes between Europeans — and also among the French, since it is astonishing to see how lightly some conservative leaders have upped the ante on enlargement, unconcerned that they may soon find themselves at odds with their rural constituencies. Admittedly, they have never taken the trouble to explain to those voters that they can thank Brussels for the fact that they still account for such a large proportion of the French electorate.

Freedom of movement, which assumes membership of a single European area, is also likely to pose serious problems in the near future if applied to the letter. The violent farmers' protests that regularly greet Spanish and Italian farm produce will probably resemble a Sunday-school outing in comparison. Applied to certain critical professions, freedom of movement and establishment would cause real social disasters. In other words, we are heading for the definition of highly complex transitional periods, country by country.

A White Paper is planned that will doubtless explore all these aspects, and France will inherit responsibility for it when it takes over the Presidency of the Council on 1 January. The paper is likely to argue the need for the countries concerned to implement vital prior reforms of all their legislative and regulatory systems during a pre-accession phase of as yet unspecified duration. Some of them have already made a start: the Czech Republic says it has already cut agricultural output by 25 % and Hungary is making regular cuts in farm subsidies. As for Poland, it has announced that it will reduce the number of its farm holdings to one third of the present figure over five years, although that will not necessarily guarantee a fall in output.

When it comes to enlargement, the process of squaring the circle has only just begun. No one doubts that it will be a long process marked by serious crises and lack of mutual understanding on the part of the candidate countries and certain EU Member States as well.