

'Europe: the false fears of enlargement' from Le Monde (13 June 1995)


Caption: On 13 June 1995, the French daily newspaper Le Monde considers the reasons behind the fears provoked by each successive enlargement of the European Communities and, subsequently, of the European Union.

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Europe: the false fears of enlargement

Six in 1957, nine in 1973, ten in 1981, twelve in 1986, fifteen today: the constant increase in the number of Member States of the European Union has not come to an end. Experts predict that, soon, there will be a Europe of thirty, including the countries of Central Europe, the three Baltic States, Malta and Cyprus.

These successive enlargements are worrying. In the first instance, to those who are already in. On the lines of the waiting room syndrome — the last one to arrive loses his initial timidity as soon as a new arrival steps into the room, just as timid — it is often the newest members who are most hesitant to open the doors of the club. If this anxiety is shared by all Europeans, whether or not they are fanatical devotees of Maastricht, that is because it is apparently logical: union is strength, but fragmentation leads to dilution, cacophony and disintegration.

Even so, the short history of the European integration shows that, to date, this reasoning has proved false. Europeans have achieved more as nine than as six, more as twelve than as nine and, if the programmes laid down in Maastricht come to fruition, the achievement of the Fifteen will greatly exceed all that has been accomplished previously. Remember all the things that were said about Britain, with which nothing would be possible, about Spain, which would ruin the common agricultural policy, or about Greece, which would not respect any Community rules. This is not to underestimate the work of the founder countries. Without the foundations laid by them, the dynamic that they created, nothing would have been possible. Benefiting from the experience acquired, the countries which followed, each in its own way, actually helped to consolidate those foundations and to accelerate that dynamic movement.

As regards the ‘technical’ problems — from the proliferation of interpreters to the duplication of places of work — they have also been resolved without difficulty, admittedly to the great satisfaction of interpreting schools and property developers but without weighing too heavily on the Community budget. If Paris was worth a mass, Europe can afford the luxury of new booths for its interpreters or two Chambers for its parliamentarians.

This gradual increase in the number of Member States of the Union has also proved the validity of another rule: if we ignore the preliminaries to any negotiations, in which each minister — even if only to convince his own public — discharges his first shot and asserts the position of his country, it quickly becomes apparent that a choice has to be made between two options. And the fact of being three against three or nine against six changes nothing in the debate. Sooner or later, either a compromise is found or a country locks down into its positions, alone against the others. In recent years, the United Kingdom has been assuming this role with consistency and determination. And when Mrs Thatcher went on saying ‘I want my money back,’ impervious to reason, the number of countries arraigned against her hardly made any difference.

This British exception shows that the obstacles do not arise from enlargement, like some perverse mechanism, but from the countries concerned. And, again, the determination shown today by London in the Bosnian crisis serves to remind us that the pride of a people also has its merits.

As far as the Kuril Islands

It is hard to see why something that has been successful hitherto would fail because of the entry into the Union of countries such as Sweden, Austria or Malta. On the other hand, questions do arise when it comes to an enlargement encompassing the former Communist countries of Central Europe. Not because they lag behind economically — the example of the integration of former East Germany proves that it is primarily a question of resources — but rather because of the difficulty that they have in shrugging off the forty-five years of Communism which have completely perverted the functioning of their societies. One cannot, for example, gloss over the proliferation of mafias, born of totalitarian blight, which undermine any organised economic development and, in the current state of affairs, would render unmanageable any opening up of frontiers. In the long term, however, it is hard to see why Poland, Bulgaria or even Albania should be kept out.

On the other hand, there are a thousand reasons why the accession of Russia to the European Union might be considered impossible. Paradoxically, the very persons who advocate opening up to Moscow at the same time provide proof of its impossibility. De Gaulle, because he liked a good turn of phrase and did not want to see the European Community develop too rapidly, spoke of a Europe from 'the Atlantic to the Urals'. Jean-François Deniau, because he had a sense of humour, thought of the Union extending from 'Brest (Brittany) to Brest (Litovsk)'. Would Russia, in order to make itself more 'European', willingly cut itself off from a huge part of its territory, that Russia which will not hear of a return of the Kuril Islands to Japan and which regards Chechnya as an 'internal problem'? And then, at the risk of being charged with 'Eurocentrism', one could say quite simply, without giving offence to such a country, that it is not truly European, nor does it seek to be.

Enlargement to include Turkey poses similar problems. Even if that country succeeds in becoming a real democracy and in settling its problems with its minority communities, the Kurds in particular, it will always aspire to retain its status as a regional power, and that takes it far beyond the European sphere. It may be a cliché, but Turkey will always remain a bridge between East and West, between the Old Continent and Asia. That is one of its great assets as a power. It is also a restraint on its ambitions one day to become a full member of the Union. Why oblige a country to choose Europe at the risk of amputating part of itself? Europe is, of course, a big adventure. But there are others.

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