

'EU enlargement: the view from the East' from Le Monde (11 December 1998)

Caption: On 11 December 1998, the French daily newspaper Le Monde describes the attitude of countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CCEE) towards the enlargement process of the European Union.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Colombani, Jean-Marie. 11.12.1998. Paris: Le Monde. "L'élargissement de l'Union vu de l'Est", auteur:Nougayrède, Natalie.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/eu_enlargement_the_view_from_the_east_from_le_monde_11_december_1998-en-af0ba7a-be78-464a-955e-0b8d1bba9c61.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

EU enlargement: the view from the East

In the run-up to the EU summit in Vienna on 11 and 12 December, several Central and Eastern European countries, especially Slovakia and Lithuania, have stepped up their efforts to join the group of countries admitted to the first round of EU enlargement. In the East, the widening gap between the happy few that have begun 'serious' accession negotiations and the others is eliciting some highly-charged reactions, in sharp contrast to the cooler, technocratic approach that has been apparent for some time in western capitals. The fact is that EU enlargement is perceived very differently on the other side of the former iron curtain.

The candidate countries are taking a position of their own, for example, in the debate on the outlines of an EU common foreign policy – a position their western negotiating partners sometimes find disturbing. Attitudes to Russia are of course a sensitive issue. Is it surprising that gut reactions to Moscow in countries that lived in direct contact with the Red Army for forty years are different from those in western Europe?

Unfair demands

Reactions to the war in Chechnya – as Jacques Rupnik, a specialist in Central and Eastern European history, observes – were a case in point. What struck the West was the extreme weakness and the debacle of the Russian troops, whereas Central Europeans were horrified at the brutal use of force: look what the Russians are still capable of!

Some of Brussels' demands are seen as unfair. Why, for example, should the candidate countries be summoned to apply the Schengen rules and seal their borders hermetically when those rules are not applied by all existing EU members — not to mention the fact that differences persist within the Schengen zone itself as to their interpretation? Are western fears of mass migration from the East not largely imaginary?

Tough negotiations can be expected, since the border issue touches on two major concerns of the Central European countries: their links with and influence on certain former Soviet republics, and their relations with neighbouring states excluded from the first round of accessions. Poland is cultivating relations with Lithuania, Ukraine and Belarus very actively and does not want them compromised by the erection of new barriers. It considers that its regional role should be welcomed by the EU as a distinctive contribution and enrichment, rather than being seen as a burden. Similarly, the Czech Republic is increasingly concerned about what will happen to its border with Slovakia, which has had little practical significance since the 'velvet divorce' of 1993 and which Brussels would now want 'closed'. Another factor is Hungary's renewed insistence on defending Magyar minorities in Romania and Slovakia.

On matters of EU foreign policy, the Central Europeans complain of lack of dialogue, consultation, and even exchange of information, with the Fifteen. To be invited for a couple of hours at the end of a European summit for the family photo is not enough. As Marzena Kisiewska, a member of the Polish negotiating team on EU membership puts it: 'If we are mainly dependent on information from the Internet, we won't get very far.'

The candidate countries also have doubts about the European social model. Does it really exist? And should it be adopted? The headlong rush to reform their whole economy in the early 1990s on the basis of British and American neoliberal recipes tended to push any concern for social dialogue into the background. Things are changing slowly and the necessary players are often missing. Despite renewal, trade unions still suffer from their image as former allies of the communist regime. The employers' side is disorganised, and the hidden accumulation of wealth means not everyone wants transparency. Nor have the many foreign investors, often attracted by cheap labour, shown any great enthusiasm for a debate on wages or social protection.

For countries that only recovered full national sovereignty in 1989–1990, or when the last Soviet soldier left their territory, the transfer of state prerogatives involved in EU accession is often taboo. It is hardly surprising that the word 'federalism' is virtually absent from Central European vocabulary, given the fear that certain nationalist circles will wrongly liken Brussels' role to the yoke formerly imposed by Moscow.

On the other hand, as Central Europeans point out, having cold feet about federalism is not confined to former Communist societies. It echoes concerns that are widely debated in the West.

A moving target

On reform of the European institutions, which some EU members pose as a prior condition for enlargement, the East replies disingenuously: Isn't reform already necessary, irrespective of enlargement? Isn't there some bad faith involved in seeking to delay the accession of new members on the grounds that the operating rules need to be changed to enable 20 or 26 countries to live together properly, when such reform already appears imperative with 15 countries?

'We are aiming at a moving target,' Central Europeans complain, stressing the uncomfortable paradox with which they are faced. While the Fifteen are groping hesitantly towards the model of Europe they wish to build and hotly debating it, the candidate countries are being summoned to conform, with little discussion, to rigid rules.

It is as if joining in the adventure of European integration, which also means the 'reunification' of Europe, consisted solely in the technical, almost mathematical adjustment of a given percentage of each country's legislation to European norms.

At a recent conference on EU enlargement seen from the East, held at the Centre for International Studies and Research (CERI) in Paris, a Romanian academic jokingly summed up this frustration: 'I sometimes have the impression the Union is behaving towards us like the sales staff of the communist era, who could say to a customer: "What, you don't like the stuff in the window? That's all there is anyway. Take it or leave it."'

Natalie Nougayrède