

'The Fifteen open their arms to the countries of Eastern Europe' from La Libre Belgique (14 December 1997)

Caption: On 14 December 1997, the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique reports on the decisions adopted by the Luxembourg European Council with regard to the opening of negotiations for accession to the European Union with Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 13-14.12.1997. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Les Quinze ouvrent leurs bras aux pays de l'Est", auteur:Verhest, Sabine , p. 6.

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The Fifteen open their arms to the countries of Eastern Europe

They have decided to start accession negotiations with Cyprus and five countries of Central and Eastern Europe

By one of our special correspondents in Luxembourg

Following on the heels of NATO in July, the European Union (EU) gave the go-ahead in Luxembourg on Friday for an historic enlargement to the East.

The Heads of State or Government of the Fifteen have decided to start accession negotiations in April with Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Estonia, as well as Cyprus. At the same time they endeavoured to spare the feelings of those candidate countries deemed to be insufficiently prepared and given a 'fail'. That task is all the more essential as Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia have just been rejected by the Atlantic Alliance.

The Fifteen have managed to establish arrangements that will make it possible to satisfy all parties and, above all, to send a positive signal to the general public in the less well-prepared states: we are differentiating, not discriminating! The eleven candidates will all be in full public view on the same starting line leading to membership of the EU. So there is no discrimination. The Fifteen will then open accession negotiations proper with the six best-prepared countries but confine themselves to 'preparatory negotiations' with the others, for which purpose they will propose annual ministerial meetings. It is a case of differentiation. Simple, when you think of it. And Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene had been thinking about it, since that was the position he adopted.

The Fifteen will probably also offer all candidates substantial financial aid and assistance in taking on board the 80 000 pages of the Community acquis. Moreover, continuous review of the progress made should enable the 'excluded' candidates to begin accession negotiations with the EU at any time, or even catch up with the front runners. These arrangements will be presented by the Fifteen to the leaders of the candidate countries at the European Summit on Saturday. A meeting like this within the Council itself is the first of its kind.

Enlargement cannot be achieved without the internal reform of common institutions and policies, first and foremost the common agricultural policy (CAP). You don't have to be a genius to see that the enlarged Union will break down financially unless its structural funds or the CAP are reorganised — or that it will turn into a vast free-trade area unless the institutions originally designed for six countries are not made more efficient. Mr Dehaene, supported by others, stressed that institutional reform was 'a precondition for enlargement'. This time, the message was given a better reception by his European partners than in the summer, when Brussels, Paris and Rome stated — in a joint declaration appended to the new Treaty of Amsterdam — that enlargement of the Community could not take place before those changes were made. Yet despite its symbolic importance, the Luxembourg Summit is only a small step, given the challenges facing the Fifteen in the years to come.

Sabine Verhest