

‘Essen: The end of the Europe of the Twelve’ from La Libre Belgique (9 December 1994)


Caption: On 9 December 1994, the Brussels daily newspaper La Libre Belgique analyses the range of decisions adopted by the Essen European Council with regard to the process of enlargement of the European Union to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs).

Source: La Libre Belgique. 09.12.1994, n° 343. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "Essen: La fin de l'Europe des Douze", auteur:Lamfalussy, Christophe , p. 5.

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Essen: The end of the Europe of the Twelve

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which will sit down at the table with the Fifteen on Saturday, should receive confirmation in Essen of a 'pre-accession strategy' negotiated at length by the foreign ministers.

It is summed up in a 20-page report which confirms that Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia will be able to start accession negotiations after — and only after — the intergovernmental conference in 1996.

There is no timetable, although the six countries had asked for one, no indication of which countries will be in the first group, nor any section on security, although that is essentially what the Central and Eastern European countries are seeking. The German Presidency's report is an exercise in caution. It postpones all the issues on which the European Union (EU) could be divided, and is hardly likely to annoy Russia.

1995: a year of meetings

Specifically, the EU is committed to holding 12 to 14 meetings a year with the six countries, starting next year. It has also undertaken to produce a White Paper for the French Presidency on all the obstacles that might be raised by this second wave of accessions, including agriculture, which will be the subject of a special report.

There is no mention in the German document of a figure for the total amount of aid to be granted by the Union to enable the six countries to move towards the single market. There is, however, a sleight of hand due to the countries of the South, which also wanted a financial envelope established for the Mediterranean. According to a Belgian diplomat, the aid will actually amount to 6.8 billion ecus over five years.

It will come from the PHARE programme, initiated after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which remains the main instrument of European aid.

Free trade, especially for the Union

While the Union is sidestepping the political issues, it is advancing step by step, faithful to the spirit of Jean Monnet, in the economic domain. Some would even argue that the Essen proposals are more modest than the existing agreements: free trade in industrial goods between the two zones, with a potential of 450 million citizens, is guaranteed from 1 January next — except for steel and textiles, which will have to wait until 1996 and 1997 respectively.

The first to benefit will be EU enterprises, which are exporting more and more to the countries of Eastern Europe — so much so that the trade balance was reversed in 1991. A major barrier still exists: farm produce from the East is hampered by European restrictions which protect our subsidised agriculture. Some of the countries, like Hungary and Poland, are much more dependent on agricultural exports than others.

Certain countries, such as Britain, do not envisage these new accessions taking place without a radical reform of the common agricultural policy. They take a similar view of the structural funds, which, according to European Commission Vice-President Sir Leon Brittan, will be 'huge' if the rules are not changed. In view of the angry reaction from France and Spain, the issue has been transferred to the Commission.

Four hours in which to explain their positions

Needless to say, such small steps will not satisfy the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which were hoping for a swift rapprochement with the Union. But their diplomats have learnt to look at things a little more philosophically. As Jan Kulakowski, Poland's Ambassador to the EU, recently remarked: 'We are coming to terms with the difference between what politicians say and what they do.'

The six Heads of State or Government — Lech Walesa is away on a visit to South Korea — will have four hours on Saturday in which to explain their positions. And at least one person will be listening carefully: Jacques Delors, who said on Wednesday that Europe could help the countries of the East in another area entirely, ‘that of the new dangers to security posed by ultranationalism, the confusion between ethnic group and nation, and the spread of religious fundamentalism.’

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