

Interview with José da Silva Lopes: trade negotiations with the EEC (Lisbon, 23 October 2007)

Source: Interview de José da Silva Lopes / JOSÉ DA SILVA LOPES, Miriam Mateus, prise de vue : François Fabert.- Lisbonne: CVCE [Prod.], 23.10.2007. CVCE, Sanem. - VIDEO (00:08:34, Couleur, Son original).

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/interview_with_jose_da_silva_lopes_trade_negotiations_with_the_eec_lisbon_23_october_2007-en-6add5625-196c-40f3-8e1b-e07931656c5e.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

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[Miriam Mateus] What was the economic link between Portugal and the other Community countries at that time?

[José da Silva Lopes] Portugal had the same links with the other Community countries as all the other European countries that didn't belong to the Community had. So, it was a third country, we started to notice and to suffer discrimination against our products in the Community market. Portuguese tomato concentrate, for example, was much more difficult to sell because the Italian product was naturally favoured. We had the same difficulties as any EFTA country, which means any European country, it wasn't only EFTA, it was any European country.

When the UK asked for the first ... The first thing the UK did after EFTA, as you know, was to try to negotiate an EFTA treaty with the EEC, and it didn't work. General de Gaulle opposed it again. This was the project led by Edward Heath, the British Prime Minister at the time, who, I'd say, was perhaps the most pro-European British leader that I've ever known. The UK tried to accede to the EEC, and, at that time, with the UK leaving EFTA, the other EFTA countries clearly all had an interest in negotiating with the EEC, and so did Portugal. And, what's more, I repeat, at that time, the British themselves encouraged — quite rightly, they were doing their duty, they acted correctly — they encouraged the EFTA countries to negotiate with the European Community.

At that time, Mr Correia de Oliveira was, once again, the Minister responsible for European negotiations. I'd like to take this opportunity to say that our integration in Europe in those years was the responsibility of two people, and mainly Mr Correia de Oliveira, who was a member of the Government and who was the person who ushered us towards integration in Europe. Without him, we would have acceded much later, there's no doubt about that, we'd certainly be members [of the European Community] now, but we would have acceded much later. Like the Spanish and others, we would have got there later. We joined at that stage, and it was down to two people: the influence of Mr Correia de Oliveira and the perseverance and confidence of Ambassador Rui Teixeira Guerra. No history of Portugal's involvement in European integration can disregard those two names.

So, at that time, we tried to negotiate with the EEC as well, just like any other EFTA country. But General de Gaulle said 'no' to the British again — though that wasn't the most important thing for the British — so he said 'no' again, and that was that. It was only when General de Gaulle was replaced by President Pompidou that new opportunities arose for the UK to accede to the EEC. The UK and Denmark acceded at that stage, and Norway also tried to accede. Or rather, Norway negotiated accession, and then the Norwegian people rejected it because of fisheries and other issues of that sort. So, the EEC's door was also opened to the Norwegians, but they didn't want to take advantage of it, they didn't want to accede, but that was their business.

At that time, then, Portugal, like the other EFTA countries, had to negotiate with the European Community. I was also involved in those negotiations, which were led at diplomatic level by Ambassador Rui Teixeira Guerra again. Mr Correia de Oliveira was no longer in the Government, it was Mr Rui Patrício, who also did a good job. Marcelo Caetano's time was now over. But things went well politically. Mr Rui Patrício clearly did a good job, but he didn't have the knowledge or the connections that Mr Correia de Oliveira had. Things didn't go badly in that respect, though; it was the political atmosphere that was a little difficult, and there was a lot of negative reaction.

That was because EFTA had never previously attached much importance to the fact that Portugal was a dictatorship. We were, or we were considered to be, a soft dictatorship. And, unlike the Spanish dictatorship, at first, it didn't generate the same ... After the war, the Spanish, as you know, came in for a great deal of criticism from other European countries, which is why they didn't join the OECD and we did. But we were considered to be a dictatorship that had been pro-Allies or that had at least cooperated with the Allies, so things had been better for us.

By around 1970, however, things were getting rather uncomfortable for us, not so much because of the dictatorship but because of colonial policy. The colonial problems had begun in 1960, as you know, and had got worse over the years, and, in 1970, there was great deal of external hostility towards Portugal. Europe wasn't very comfortable to be negotiating with Portugal at that time, but it did negotiate. I have to admit that, in fact, it was ... well, it was good for us, and it was probably good for Europe for it to have happened then. But Mr Correia de Oliveira was no longer doing that job — although I think he still cast his shadow over things — Ambassador Guerra was responsible at diplomatic level, while I was responsible at technical level. I was the one who coordinated the technical team.

So we drew up the 1972 commercial agreement with the EEC, which was based on EFTA. Basically, it involved maintaining the relations that we'd had in EFTA with the UK and with Denmark, since Sweden remained in EFTA just the same, but we maintained relations with the other two as they had been. There were arrangements that we couldn't retain. For example, we had arrangements for tomato concentrate in EFTA that we couldn't retain in the agreement with the EEC, but they were small adjustments. In general, the same conditions were maintained. We also managed to retain a lengthy transitional period, one which we even prolonged a little.

And I have to say that I've got great memories. I didn't work at ministerial level, I worked with senior EEC officials. At that time, the EEC person responsible for the negotiations was the Director-General for External Relations, a Dutch diplomat called Wellenstein. Relations with him and his team were always excellent, it's one of the best experiences of my life to have negotiated with them, and it went well.

Then a few years went by, the 25 April Revolution happened, and things improved. So I think that answers your question.