EU Enlargement to the East: The Anatomy of a Reticence

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Although Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have already joined NATO, a decade has passed and still no Eastern or Central European country has "achieved" membership to the European Union. A serious debate has emerged in the countries awaiting membership as to whether it is so desirable while the EU is still holding back. Jacques Rupnik sees in this reticence the proof that, indeed, "Europe is afraid of itself" and says that Europe's true challenge is to move beyond integration out of fear.

“The cold war is over but I don’t remember any singing in the streets or church bells ringing. Are we too tired to sing? Or too dazzled by our luck? Has something crippled us on our way from there to here?” John Le Carré

When the Wall came down and communism collapsed in what used to be known as the Eastern bloc, the hopes of the countries of Central Europe were identified with democratic change and the “return to Europe”. More than a decade later they have established democracy as the only game in town but the prospect of joining “Europe” i.e. the European Union, like the Bermuda triangle, gets further removed the closer one approaches it. It was indeed striking to see last year Poland, Hungary and the Czech republic join NATO as the most tangible result of a decade of, on the whole, successful transitions to democracy and to a market economy. A European dream was coming true under the banner of … the United States.

As for the enlargement of the European Union, the mood in the Western capitals is not only far removed from the (verbal) euphoria welcoming the “velvet revolutions” in the “Other Europe”, but also from the solemn promises of chancellor Helmut Kohl, speaking of the enlargement as a “moral duty”, [1] or of President Jacques Chirac repeating in 1996-1997 in the Polish, Hungarian and Czech Parliaments his committment to see them join the EU by the year 2000. Indeed the French presidency of the EU has set itself two main goals: to push through the unfinished institutional reform and to foster the common foreign and security policy (CFSP). And although both can be presented as necessary pre-requisites for a successful future enlargement, it is no less clear that the latter is, for the
time being, put on the backburner.

To be sure, the official line from Brussels is meant to be reassuring, pointing to the Helsinki summit last December which opened the enlargement process to six new countries (Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Malta and, last but not least, Turkey) as evidence. However, the inclusion in the process of “new ins” is good for the morale of the latter but says little about the speed of the accession negotiation with the “old ins” (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia). No less importantly, the main consequence of the decision to open the enlargement process to a dozen countries was not the announcement of a new Marshall Plan to prepare their accession, but to express the concern, voiced first by Jacques Delors, followed by the joint Giscard-Schmidt statement [2] and finally Joschka Fisher’s manifesto about the possible dilution of an enlarged EU and thus the need to prepare a new leap forward in the federalist direction. In other words: back to the enlargement vs. deepening debate of the early nineties which led first to Maastricht and the goal of the common currency and only then, in June 1993, to the Copenhagen summit committing the EU to an Eastward enlargement prospect.

What are the main reasons of this reticence? Perhaps the most important is the “lack of a vision” for a post-cold war Europe, to use President Vaclav Havel’s phrase during his visit to France last year. In the day to day management of the common market, successfully supervised by the often unfairly decried “Brussels bureaucracy”, the wider sight of what is at stake in the shaping of the new European order has been lost. Was Maastricht the appropriate response to the most significant change in post-war European history? Some, like Lord Dahrendorf, former European Commissioner now director of St Antony’s College in Oxford, doubt it, calling Maastricht “yesterday’s future”. Others, favorable to the treaty’s main offspring, the “euro”, believed that once again, in line with the well-tried Jean Monnet method, the common currency will produce, almost mechanically, a “European political identity”. The opposite, of course, is the case: the “euro” is weak precisely because there is no European political identity. Such an identity cannot be shaped by central bankers and converging interest rates, but more likely by a common commitment not to tolerate ethnic cleansing in the Balkans or to a common project of historical significance: integrating East Central Europe, which for half a century was in the orbit of Russia, in the economic and political system of Western Europe.

The second, related reason is the lack of leadership. Schroeder or Jospin are, in their own terms, successful middle of the road social democrats, thriving on a wave of American-led economic growth, but they hardly embody a political will for Europe. And without political will and vision enlargement easily becomes a secondary preoccupation given that there do not seem to be strong economic interests pushing in that direction. Not that Eastern markets are not attractive enough but the West Europeans area already in a process of conquering them. They invest particularly in Hungary, Poland and the Czech republic) and run a massive, 30 billion euro a year trade surplus with the East-Central European candidates. The temptation is therefore strong to keep these economic benefits without taking on the political responsability. A report by the German Chamber of Commerce released in April 2000 called for the process of enlargement to be slowed down arguing that “quality is more important than quantity.” [3] Commenting on the lack of interest in enlargement among the EU countries, the head of the Polish Governmental Center for Strategic Studies, Jerzy Kropiwnicki, concluded: “The EU has
already got all it wanted”. [4]

The political translation of this asymmetry of interests and motivations concerning the enlargement was particularly obvious at the March 1999 Berlin summit concerning the Agenda 2000 i.e. establishing the EU budget till 2006. Germany first stated it wanted to diminish its (admittedly considerable) contribution to the budget. France fought bravely against any substantial change in the Common Agricultural Policy (nearly half of the EU budget goes to support 4% of its population). Britain refused to back down on the famous rebate obtained many years ago by Mrs Thatcher (after a lot of tough talk and handbag waving). Spain, Portugal, Greece and others would not accept a reform of the so-called structural funds to help less developed regions. They have greatly benefited from them for some twenty years, why should they now share them with some even poorer relatives on the Danube? [5] Everybody had “good” reasons not to touch the status quo (namely giving in to influential lobbies) and defend what they consider to be their “acquis” (not very “communautaire” though!). What follows from this is that keeping the same budget level without any substantial reform of the main common policies there simply would be no room for enlargement of the EU in the next five years. That, at least is the conclusion derived from what could be called the “accountant’s way of enlargement”.

Without political will capable of articulating a political project for the Union’s Eastward expansion no wonder that West European public opinion is getting cooler. The latest Eurobarometer survey, released at the end of April 2000, is particularly worrying in this respect. It shows that while an absolute majority of Europeans consider their country’s membership as a “good thing”, 43% are in favour of the enlargement of the EU while only 28% consider this as a priority. [6] The most favorable to the enlargement are the Scandinavians (over 60%) while the most reluctant are the French and the Austrians. Indeed, the diminishing support for the enlargement, noted among the immediate neighbours of the Central European candidates (Germany and Austria), is probably the major factor in the EU slow-down on enlargement. Another Eurobarometer poll released in the Spring of 1999 indicates that when asked about the possibility of the free movement of the labour force from Central Europe in the EU only 3% Austrians and 6% Germans were in favour. In other words, it is not just the Haider’s supporters but also Schroeder’s and the SPÖ’s electorate which is becoming reluctant on the enlargement issue. The rise of xenophobia in the EU, associating immigrants with rising criminality, goes hand in hand with old fashioned trade union protectionism. [7]

All this obviously has an impact on the way the enlargement process is perceived by the candidate countries: although public opinions in Western and Central Europe have different concerns they also are communicating vessels. There is a parallel rise of “premature euroscepticism” among some of the candidates and of “enlargo-scepticism” in the member states. While most of the political and economic elites of the candidate countries clearly share the goal of joining the EU as soon as possible, the public opinions are increasingly differentiated between urban populations which strongly back the process, a rural population (particularly in Poland) which is getting hostile and a growing proportion of people who are indifferent. Clearly, the pro-European momentum, which has dominated the first decade of post-communist transition, is being eroded and some observers even do not exclude an anti-European backlash if there are no tangible results of the “long march to Europe” in sight soon. Although such a change of heart seems unlikely, a serious debate about the implications of joining the EU is emerging among
Central European candidates. Interestingly, it addresses some of the underlying suspicions among some of the Union’s founding members that, independently of their economic or legislative progress, the Eastern newcomers to the club might not be committed believers in an ever more integrated Europe. Three main themes are structuring the Central European debate are fuelling this suspicion: 1. national sovereignty; 2. the socio-economic model 3. European defence identity.

1. Sovereignty and democracy

It is not easy to consider giving up a substantial part of a national sovereignty that has only just been reclaimed. While the demise of the nation-state in the context of globalisation has been much discussed in Western Europe, it is worth recalling that in 1989 the return of democracy in East-Central Europe was closely intertwined with that of national sovereignty. The end of the communist system was also that of the last colonial empire. Popular sovereignty and national sovereignty became indistinguishable. “Wir sind das Volk” (we are the people) the slogan of the East German demonstrators in October 1989 became “Wir sind ein Volk” (we are one people) after the Wall came down in November. This in large part accounts for a certain reluctance of influential voices among the candidates (in the ruling Solidarity coalition in Poland, in Vaclav Klaus’ party in the Czech republic, the Smallholders party now part of the Hungarian government coalition) to move rapidly towards abandoning of sovereignty in favour of an institution which is seen as distant and whose democratic practice and transparency are not always obvious to all.

The NATO intervention in Kosovo in the Spring of 1999 and, a year later, the sanctions against Austria after Haider’s Party entry in the government, were seen by many in Western Europe as attempts by the “1968 generation” to re-define the meaning of sovereignty and of the European project in the post-cold war era. In Central Europe both met with ambivalence and even open opposition. Vaclav Klaus even lumped the three issues (Kosovo, Austria, enlargement) together as a threat to Czech national sovereignty: “Europe is now a fundamental challenge to nation-states, i.e. to their sovereignty”. [8]

The Hungarian Prime minister Viktor Orban’s invitation to Chancellor Schüssel, the first since the formation of the government, was interpreted by his liberal opponents at home and by some in Western Europe as an implicit criticism of EU’s ‘interference’ policy. In the words of Miklos Haraszti: “The EU has, in effect, redefined the political conditions for membership. Now the Austrians and their eastern neighbours have to decide if they will hide behind an outdated notion of sovereignty or contribute to a European federation determined to exile extremism”. The Central European debate on sovereignty and political conditionality of EU membership has only began.

2. The European socio-economic model

In the great debate between the anglo-saxon, liberal, free-market model and the continental welfare state model where will the Central European newcomers to the EU fit? Regardless of the merits of the argument it seems clear that the prime inspiration for the economic reforms in Central Europe (particularly in the first half of the 1990’s in Poland under Leszek Balcerowicz, in the Czech Republic under Vaclav Klaus or later in Estonia) was mainly the ‘free market’ model. After half a century of state socialism
considered as bankrupt, it seemed more tempting to turn to economic liberalism as an transition strategy rather than to the social-democratic welfare state model. The early nineties contrast between rapid growth in the United states and Britain with stagnation and over 10% unemployment in continental Europe only reinforced the Central Europeans’ appeal of “shock therapy” approach.

On the other hand, although the so-called “European model” was not the inspiration, the practice in most of Central Europe after a decade of transition is still much closer to it than it is to the Chicago School laissez faire capitalism. Vaclav Klaus’s policies were the most obvious illustration of the contrast between borrowed theories and domestic realities. The fears to see the Central Europeans as out of sink with the mainstream European consensus of liberalism with a social-democratic face are vastly exaggerated. On the whole they share the same apprehension (or expectations) towards the globalisation process as the mainstream EU members.

3. European Security and Defence Identity

The third underlying suspicion about the central European candidates not being quite “good” Europeans concerns their attitude towards the emerging common foreign and security policy (CFSP). The Central Europeans have, for understandable historical reasons, an acute (perhaps exaggerated) concern about their security: From Munich to Yalta, from Budapest 1956 to Prague 1968, they have good reasons to consider that security is paramount to everything else in the transition be it democracy, the market economy or regional cooperation. What they saw as being “on offer” in “Europe after 1990 was not altogether convincing: the CSCE collective security system equipped to deal with their old fears and new threats (“when everybody defends the security of everybody then nobody guarantees the security of anybody” as Henry Kissing put it). The dismal performance of the EU in the Wars of Yugoslav Dissolution did not give much credibility to the prospect of a European security policy. In doubt, they turned to NATO for the good old/bad old services it had provided to West Europeans (“To keep the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down” as Lord Ismail had put it). To be sure, these “old Nato” motivations have now been satisfied by the inclusion of three countries in the Alliance while a recent summit in the Lithuanian capital has announced to new drive to keep the NATO enlargement process open. Is this suspiciously excessive ‘americanophilia’, incompatible with the recent efforts, after the Kosovo intervention, by the EU to establish under Solana’s chairmanship a European Common Foreign Security Policy ?. Not seen from Warsaw, Budapest or Prague: it will be easier, they argue, to build such a policy with the strongly Western oriented Central Europeans than with some of the current EU members such as Greece or neutral Sweden and Austria.

Perhaps the most controversial debate still to come concerning the Eastern enlargement is the debate about borders : the borders in Europe and the borders of Europe. The former issue concerns the nature of the borders in an enlarged EU. In short : to “sell” the enlargement within the EU it is important to keep the notion of “hard” borders within the Schengen system. If you abolish internal borders, you want to make sure you have proper external borders of the Union. In contrast, to “sell” the enlargement in the countries of East-Central Europe you tend to opt for “soft”, more open borders between the “ins” and the “outs”. For Poland, it is difficult for old historical and new economic and political reasons, to accept a “hard” border with Lithuania or the Ukraine. The same goes for the
Czechs vis-à-vis Slovakia. Hungary has conceived all its policy towards the Hungarian minorities in neighbouring Romania or Slovakia on the prospect of greater access and protection within an integrated Europe. To see a Schengen border established with these neighbours would produce the opposite and obviously be a major blow to that European strategy. In other words, while the adoption of EU standards is perceived as a positive, modernizing influence, the adoption of the Schengen system, even before joining the Union, is perceived negatively, as a reallocation of uncertainties and dangers by the EU on the new, weak, would-be member countries.

The enlargement process implicitly poses the question of the borders of Europe although these should not be confused with those of the EU. They are clearly established to the West, to the North and to the South, but not to the East. Toynbee used to distinguish between limes, the frontier of a decaying empire and limen, the frontier of an expanding empire. East-Central Europe is at the crossroad between the two: a vanishing Soviet/Russian empire and a reluctant would-be empire, the European Union. In some respects the EU could be for the countries of East-Central Europe a substitute or a functional equivalent of the Habsburg empire: helping to neutralise the feuds and rivalries among them, on the one hand, and to balance their relationship with Germany, on the other hand.

The Helsinki decision last December to extend the list of plausible candidates for enlargement sounded like good news to those who worried about Europe not being able to suggest a credible European future for the countries of South Eastern Europe. [9] However, the decision to include Turkey among the candidates left most of the Central European front-runners for enlargement perplexed. The EU has displayed for more than a decade extreme caution, to say the least, vis-à-vis its enlargement to Central Europe; suddenly it makes a daring geopolitical leap to the Middle East. Including Turkey means prospective EU borders with countries such as Iran, Iraq or Syria. Not quite the reassuring club the post-communist candidates had in mind. That debate about the borders of the EU and the “geopolitics” of enlargement is long overdue. Whatever its outcome, it is important that these borders remain shaped by the democratic nature of the European project and not the other way around: a project shaped by pre-conceived historical or cultural borders.

The current situation is characterized by three parallel yet somewhat disconnected debates concerning the future of Europe. There is first the institutional and constitutional debate concerning the reshaping of the decision-making mechanism of the EU to overcome its looming paralysis. From Jacques Delors’ call for a new federal hard core to Joschka Fisher speech at Humboldt University in May, followed by Chirac’s speech in the Bundestag there is an attempt to establish a hard core Europe before it confronts the challenge of enlargement. Then there is a somewhat specialized, almost technocratic debate about the pros and cons, the winners and loser of the enlargement process. The current state of play could be summed up by the formula: “We pretend to want you, and you pretend to be ready”. And finally there is a debate about what to do with the Balkans: could they become the catalyst for a nascent European security policy and defence identity. For Central Europe the code words are “integration” and “enlargement”. For the Balkans it is “intervention” and “protectorates”.

For the future European architecture it is precisely the articulation between these three
issues which will matter. The eastern enlargement is considered to be the least of a priority, yet it provides an essential connection between the other two. The constitutional or federalist debate among the member-states is on the agenda mainly because without it the enlargement would paralyse the EU institutions. Similarly, how credible is the “European” prospect of Balkan countries included in the Stability Pact, launched in the aftermath of the Kosovo intervention, if the enlargement to the Central European countries with consolidated democracies is not moving?

The West European adepts of the federal hard core fear that enlargement could empty the European project of its substance. For the Central European candidates the notion of a “hard core”, “vanguard” (Delors), [10] “a group of pioneers” (Chirac),- besides the somewhat ominous and antiquated language to post-communist ears- risks emptying the enlargement project of its substance. If there is a core, they would again be the periphery. In the post-war period, Europe’s cohesion was often derived from an external integrator, the threat from the East. But today EU’s reluctance on enlargement reveals, according to Bronislaw Geremek, a “Europe afraid of itself “. The European challenge of the coming years is to move beyond a concept of integration based on fears.

Footnotes

1. Helmut Kohl said in the French Senate in October 1993 : "For me, as a German, it is unthinkable that Poland's and the Czech Republic's Western frontiers remain once and for all the Eastern frontier of the EU " quoted in 14.10.1993 V. Rühe, then defense minister spoke of Germany's " vital interests " to make sure that the eastern border of NATO and the EU does not coincide with Germany's borders, cf. 1.10.1994

2. V. Giscard d'Estaing and H. Schmidt, " Time to slow-down and consolidate around 'Euro-Europe' " in International Herald Tribune, 11.4.2000

3. B. James, "In Germany, firms call for slower EU expansion" in: , 26.April 2000

4. Nasz Dziennik (Warsaw), 27.3.2000

5. The " structural funds " for the period 2000-2006 amount to 213 billion euros. 70% of the amount is destined to regions with GNP below 75% of the EU average. Just as for the agricultural policy the enlargement implies a redefinition of the criteria and of the priorities for attribution.

6. Cf. Eurobarometer 52 (surveys conducted at the end of 1999 and released in April 2000 in Brussels). Interestingly, citizens of the EU would give priority to the enlargement to Norway and Switzerland who have, so far, turned down the offer. The ‘order of priority’ for the " Eastern candidates is : Hungary, Poland, the Czech republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, etc.

7. Needless to say these migration fears are vastly exaggerated. Moreover, with the ageing of the West European population, a period of labour shortage is predicted within a decade. Meanwhile the candidate-countries of Central Europe have themselves become countries of immigration from the former Soviet Union or the Balkans. Most of them are temporary workers (over 700 000 come to Poland each year). For a study of the
implications for an enlarged EU see the report of the study group chaired by G. Amato
The borders of an enlarged EU, published by the European University Institute, Florence,
1999 and Heather Grabbe, The sharp edges of Europe: security implications of extending

took, predictably, the opposite view, criticizing the EU not for what it said about Haider,
but for its silence on repression in Chechnya cf. V. Havel/ J. Rupnik, "Dialogue pragois
sur l'Europe", in: (summer 2000) p 18-20. (transcript of a Radio Prague broadcast of

9. cf. Vladimir Gligorov, Research report nr. 267 (July 2000), Wiener Institut für
Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche (WIIW).


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