ENLARGEMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE DEMOCRATIC DIMENSION

This paper was prepared for presentation to the 6th Biennial Conference of the European Community Studies Association (USA) held in Pittsburgh in June 1999.

The views expressed in this paper are strictly personal.

Geoff Harris
Secretariat
European Parliament
(Bureau BvS 211)
Rue Wiertz
B-1047 Brussels
Tel.(32-2) 284.36.08
Fax (32-2) 230.12.14
E-mail: gharris@europarl.eu.int

May 1999

As Europeans prepare to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, it is an appropriate moment to check on whether the high hopes for peace and democracy which this event created are being satisfied. In 1999 the essential ambivalence and uncertainty which have come to characterise the process of European integration have been all too apparent. It is perhaps this contrast between achievements and crises, ambitious projects and internal anxieties which confirms the obvious historical fact that the European Union remains a young political structure, constantly evolving but with insufficient history to provide a sense of stability in times of crisis.

In 1999 the EU is already engaged in accession negotiations with six countries. These negotiations are set to pass their mid-way point (at least in quantative terms) in the middle of 1999 and at the end of the year more countries are likely to join in these accession negotiations. Moreover, as the Commission President-designate,. Romano Prodi, told the European Parliament on April 13th 1999, it is time to provide a timetable and a target date for the completion of these negotiations.

Ten years ago such an advanced state of the EU's fifth enlargement would have been unimaginable. At that time Sweden, Austria and Finland were still involved in negotiations for the European Economic Area and had only just begun to agonize over the question of whether the unfolding events in the communist world required a reconsideration of their hitherto extremely detached approach to European political integration.

The speeding up of the enlargement process has not, as many expected, led to a lack of attention by the EU to is own internal development. In January 1999, eleven EU member states took the irrevocable step of effectively abolishing their national currencies as a step towards the establishment of a single currency in 2002.

In March 1999 the European Commission as a whole resigned; an event which in itself symbolised dramatically the fact that the EU is a new emerging political and constitutional structure in which the European Parliament plays a role much stronger than many people (including, as it turned out even European Commissioners!) had hitherto realised. The entry into force on May 1st 1999 of the Treaty of Amsterdam also strengthened the role of the European Parliament as well as providing the legal basis for the deepening of the process of European integration in major policy

areas. The Treaty also clarified in Articles F. 1 and O the fact that only democratic states could aspire to join or remain in the EU.

This is not the place to analyse whether the Treaty of Amsterdam should have gone further in terms of the institutional reforms required to prepare for the 5th enlargement. Indeed it is no longer necessary to do so as the machinery is already being established for the convening of a new Treaty reform (intergovernmental) conference in the near future. The concern originally expressed by the European Parliament, as well as by some member states, that the Amsterdam Treaty did not make the Union's institutions ready for enlargement, has now become the received wisdom. Instead of these concerns leading to a slowdown of the enlargement process, it is the advancement of that very process which is re-enforcing the need for institutional reform.

The agreement on some partial reforms of the EU's finances, structural funds and agricultural policy which was reached in Berlin in March 1999 also confirms how the enlargement process and the need for the Union to maintain its political credibility are keeping up the pressure for internal reform of the EU. These reforms will, like the Amsterdam Treaty not, by themselves, resolve all the problems which concern enlargement, but the agreement on Agenda 2000 does also remove the fear in the candidate countries that the Union's internal problems will slow down enlargement.

The holding of the fifth European Parliament elections in June 1999 will also be the occasion for a major test of public opinion on the key issues of the deepening and widening of the European Union. They will provide a test as to whether the forces of Eurosceptism and hostility to enlargement really are on the increase, or whether in fact the established political families, now in the process of becoming European-wide political parties, can still guide the process forward.

This very dynamic situation inside the EU somehow contrasts with first signs of disillusionment in the candidate countries, many of whose leaders continue to feel that the EU has been too slow to bring them into the mainstream of Europe's political development. It is, in fact, the case that with the tragic and now horrific exception of most of the former Yugoslavia, the picture in the rest of ex-communist Europe to the west and south-west of Russia is a positive one. Democracy has taken root. Elections are held regularly. Governments are voted in and out. Leaders of

different parties come together in parliaments and sometimes divide between them key positions of the state (eg. Poland, Czech Republic). Problems with regard to the rights of minorities are being faced and resolved (eg. Slovakia, Latvia). Hardly anybody votes for parties which would return to the communist system and even the ultra-nationalist right has tended to fail the real test of the ballot box. All countries concerned have had to subscribe to the basic values of democracy and human rights as set out in the Paris Charter and to cooperate within the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Democracy has thereby contributed hugely to continental stability and it is hardly surprising that the main exception to the positive situation should result in a conflict between the (recent enlarged) NATO and the last effectively communist dictatorship left in Europe, the Miłošević regime.

In this context the decision by the European Council in Copenhagen in June 1993 to include democracy as the first, and non-negotiable criteria for EU membership, can be seen as both a contribution to, and a reflection of, the new situation in Europe where democracy and security are treated as two sides of the same coin. In Copenhagen the European Council included amongst the binding political criteria for future members the achievement of institutional stability as a guarantee of democratic order and the rule of law, and of ensuring respect for human rights, as well as the protection of the rights of minorities.[1]

This statement was strengthened by the new Article F.I of the Treaty of Amsterdam which stated, for the first time, that if there was a "serious and persistent breach" of basis democratic standards a procedure could be set in motion to suspend the rights of a member state. The new wording of Article O linked this procedure to the accession process, thereby establishing formally what was already informally clearly the case, that countries not having established stable democratic institutions could not aspire to EU membership. This could be seen as adding a note of clarity. It could also, however, be seen as reflecting a doubt that in a rapidly enlarging Union the democratic transition so recently achieved in many countries could not automatically be considered as irreversible.

---

1 European Parliament Task Force Paper N° 20: Democracy and Respect for Human Rights in the Enlargement Process of the EU.

Whilst Mark Mazower[1] has been quite correct in warning against any assumption that democracy is somehow naturally suited to Europe it would be wrong to allow Europe's history to encourage a degree of pessimism about future prospects in a way that would undermine the common commitment so frequently made to enlargement of the EU as a contribution to the stability and well-being of all Europeans involved.

There is no doubt that for some, the end of the Cold War came at an "inconvenient" moment. It is also the case that the Cold War and the lack of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe did initially provide the project of integration with what Attila Agh has characterised as "its cohesion, sense of purpose and stability"[2]. It is, however, equally true that the end of the Cold War has meant that democracy could develop as a major objective of the EU's evolving foreign policy. It was, moreover, the European Parliament which used its budgetary powers to force democracy into a high place on the list of objectives to be set for the assistance programmes which were put in place to aid the first post-communist governments of Central and Eastern Europe.

The advancement of the candidate countries' preparations for enlargement can also be seen as a process whereby democracy is extended, in an irreversible fashion, deep and wide across a region of Europe emerging from decades of dictatorship and/or foreign occupation. The possibility of EU-membership therefore became an extremely effective source of influence on the internal development of the candidate countries. This influence may, of course, be a source of irritation or indeed as in the case of the Meciar Government in Slovakia, a source of open conflict with the Government of a candidate country, but this does not detract from its existence as a political fact of life for all the twelve countries involved in the enlargement process. The very fact that Croatia or indeed Turkey have been effectively left out of this process confirms all the more clearly that a genuine commitment to democratic norms is a condition, not just of accession, but of arriving at the negotiation table in the first place.

---

1 Mark Mazower: Dark Continent, Europe's Twentieth Century
Allen Lane 1998

2 Attila Ágh: The role of ECE Parliaments in the pre-accession strategy
Hungarian Centre For Democracy Studies (Budapest papers N° 21, p 10)

The promotion or export of democracy has therefore become explicitly part of the EU's purpose in contributing to the rebuilding of the societies of former communist countries (eg. through the PHARE Democracy programme), as well as an inevitable consequence of the act of candidature of each country seeking to join the EU. In this way the very fact of being a candidate country removes the room to manoeuvre in any potential anti-democratic direction. For although countries may dislike being dictated to by the EU, no country now participating would like to be excluded from the enlargement process. This would amount to a national humiliation as well as bringing possible economic disadvantages or unwelcome domestic challenges. In a sense it can be argued that the Brezhrev doctrine of limited sovereignty has already been, in effect, replaced by new and more beneficent constraints on the sovereignty of any country seeking EU membership.

If the Brezhrev doctrine of the 1960's was seen as an element of stability in the heart of Europe it can be argued that democratisation and the drive for EU-membership are now the main sources of security and stability for the countries concerned. For this reason many observers remain perplexed by some candidate countries enthusiasm for early NATO accession and certainly, as David Gombert, a former adviser to President Bush has argued, it cannot provide the economic advantages of EU membership. He added "the main threat to Central and Eastern Europe is not of invasion but of internal instability"[1]. EU enlargement should strengthen stability and thereby secure the democratic gains won by the people and countries of the regions.

David Gow has identified very clearly[2] the main ways in which security and democracy have become irrevocably intertwined and of equal importance both to the EU and the candidate countries. He points out that the collapse of communism left behind societies "without the resources, capacities and institutions for autonomous decision making". Providing support and inspiration for the success of democratic transition is therefore now part of the EU's mission. He goes on, "a failure by the EU to reach out to Central and Eastern Europe would result in the EU's

---

1 International Herald Tribune 21.5.1998, p 8.

2 David Gow: Security and Democracy (In" Back to Europe" edited by Karen Henderson, UCL Press, London 1999) p 29.

losing its meaning". This would not only reduce the benefits it provides to its existing members, but would result in its missing the chance "to extend the zone of cooperation and integration as widely as possible" in a way which reduces threats to stability and security and creates the conditions favourable for trade and prosperity. The EU's interest is not just to ensure that democracy succeeds as an end in itself, but also to ensure that elections, accountability, transparency etc. create the conditions for domestic stability within neighbouring (future member) countries.

The building of democracy in the EU's neighbourhood as part of the enlargement process is therefore in the interest of the EU itself, not least as a way of resolving problems which could have an impact inside the EU. The examples Gow provides of the Kurdish problem and the Yugoslav crisis are all too apposite as reminder of just how great the EU's interest is in securing democracy and stability in as wide a geographical area as possible.

Discussions on enlargement sometimes miss these fundamental points as interest inevitably turns to economic and social issues, concerns about cheap labour or new competitive challenges as well as anxieties about immigration and the ability of the EU to function with a much wider membership. Such concerns are not new, but as Christopher Preston reminds us in this review of the four previous enlargements[1] "enlargement has always been part of the EC/EU's historic mission". Moreover, there is nothing new about this link between democratisation and enlargement. Greece, Spain and Portugal were themselves obliged to democratise in order to achieve their ambition to join the Community, as it was then called.

Just as the safeguarding of democracy can be seen as one of the motives for enlargement, **both** from the EU and the candidate countries' perspectives, so the advancement of democratisation can be seen as part of the very preparation for enlargement now well under way in **both** the candidate countries and the EU itself. The successful advancement of these twin processes of democratisation and public acceptance of their consequences may also be seen as conditions for the successful conclusion of the enlargement process. Given the controversy which has often occurred over institutional aspects of European political integration, it should come as no surprise

---

1 Christopher Preston: Enlargement and Integration in the EU. Routledge/UACES 1997, p3.

that the completion of the enlargement process, bearing in mind these pre-conditions, could become problematic inside the EU and some of the candidate countries.

In the Candidate Countries

Attila Agh[1] has clarified the paradox whereby "former members of the Soviet 'external empire' had to be transformed into a new kind of limited sovereignty. This was forced upon them by the network of the all-European organizations as a mandatory adaptation to the New World Order and as an "entrance fee " to these organizations. Thus, the countries concerned regained their sovereignty in the early nineties and were expected to give it up immediately again, so to say, right after the pull out of Soviet troops" This was their rather rough introduction, not just to the inevitable consequences of an open society and market economy in the era of globalisation, but also, as they prised open the door to the EU, to the fact that European integration implied the sudden abolition of the frontier between foreign policy and domestic politics, as well as a consequent drastic alteration of the balance between the internal and external aspects of sovereignty.

Some of the most dramatic lessons of this experience might seem uncontroversial: the tough message to Slovakia that unless it established a normally functioning parliamentary democracy and legal system it could not hope to take part in EU accession negotiations; insistence by the EU on the need for candidate countries respect to ethnic minority rights in Romania, Slovakia and Latvia has, in the last year, been accepted by the countries concerned and this acceptance has been endorsed by voters in the countries concerned. The ambition of EU membership has similarly pushed forward programmes of political decentralisation or acceptance of sexual freedom in candidate countries. In short, all candidate countries have been firmly pushed towards consensual democracy and as Agh concludes:

"Democratic transition has not only chronologically coincided with the association to the

---

1 Attila Agh: Processes of Democratisation in the Central European and Balkan States. Budapest Papers N° 229, p 27.

EU, but there is a deeper connection between them as two sides of the same coin, the internal and external dimensions of the same project"[1].

The development of civil society, especially non-governmental organisations have, for example, been a consequence of the establishment of consensual democracy and an explicit objective of such EU policies as the PHARE democracy programme.

The problematic stage of this process is now beginning, as the leaders and citizens of candidate countries have come to take their democracy for granted and begin to resent what they see as the excessive submission of their national sovereignty to Brussels. Similarly, as public opinion in the candidate countries becomes aware of some of the consequences of accession (eg. agricultural reform, sale of land to foreigners), the threat of a possible populist challenge to the elite's ambitions for EU membership many well emerge. As inside the EU, the challenges will have to be faced up to and resolved through democracy (parliamentary votes, elections, referenda). National leaders in candidate countries delude themselves if they think that the EU member states will do them particular favours during the accession negotiations just because they face the threat of the kind of populist backlash of the kind EU leaders had to face and overcome in the early 1990's.

In the European Union

If the loss of the candidate countries newly won sovereignty is one of the paradoxical consequences of coming closer to the EU, it is not the only paradox of the current situation. The very fact that twelve countries are queueing up to join the EU, which has only just enlarged from 12 to 15 states and converted itself from a mere European Community into a monetary and would-be political union, is a clear confirmation of the success of the first 40 years of political integration and a remarkable contrast with the almost permanent crisis of confidence which characterises the media's analysis of developments in the EU in the 1990's. If it is the victory of

[1] Ibid p 18.

democracy in Central and Eastern Europe which has produced this paradox it is equally paradoxical to point out that if the enlargement process is to be carried forward to a successful conclusion the EU will itself have to carry forward its own process of internal democratisation.

This process has already advanced with a rapidity not expected a decade ago when the first reforms of the Treaty of Rome (the Single European Act of 1987) were coming into effect. Since the end of the Cold War two new treaty reforms have been carried out but the European Parliament and many member states still insist that further steps of political integration will be required as a condition for their ratification of any new accessions to the EU. Whilst initially this may have been dismissed as a short-sighted, introverted or indeed negative approach, it has now become widely accepted that without further institutional reform, an enlarged Union could not function. A new IGC is scheduled to begin within a year.

This is not the place to argue whether further democratisation can be achieved best through the national parliaments or the European Parliament, it is enough to bear in mind that the Union's leaders are well aware of the fact that the days when their decisions could be digested by a public opinion characterised by a benign indifference, are over. Without public acceptance, the enlargement process could go off track just as almost occurred with the eventually successful project of monetary union in the early 1990's. For this reason leaders of opinion in the candidate countries are wrong to see concern with internal reforms as some kind of delaying tactic vis à vis their candidatures or to perceive the clash between the European Parliament and the Santer Commission as some kind of danger. In the first decades of integration its leaders faced few domestic challenges, but those days are over. Populist nationalism and calls for greater democracy in the EU had no substantial political audience in the 1950's and 1960's. As the New Stateman[1] put it in the days following the resignation of the Commission, what Europe now needs is a mature public debate as how it wishes to develop. Smothering such a debate inside or outside the EU risks a delayed explosion whereas accepting the need to redefine the goals and methods for a much enlarged Union in a new historical era seems only common sense.

The "problem" in the candidate countries is that for the time being the pro-EU consensus amongst

---

[1] New Statesman: Don't Panic: it's democracy. 19.3.1999, p 4.

almost all political leaders means that it is only the opponents of integration who are creating the the conditions for the kind of debate which has raged for years in, for example, France, Britain and Denmark. The concurrent completion of democratisation in the EU and the candidate countries coincides with the end of the era of "top-down" European integration as well as occurring in a period of generational change as those citizens' with memories of the war which created the background to the first steps of European integration are being replaced in a body politic made up of citizens who take EU-membership for granted but still express dissatisfaction with many aspects of its functioning. With regard to the issue of enlargement or accession, the public is only just becoming aware of what is at stake. The Agenda 2000 reforms of the EU and the specific terms for EU accession are providing citizens with their first intimations as to what the real effect of enlargement could be. More controversy is therefore inevitable.

Parliaments are one of the frameworks in which these controversial issues can be aired. As all the countries involved in the enlargement process are parliamentary democracies and as the European Parliament also has to ratify each accession, the parliamentary dimension of the enlargement process exists at various levels and both reflects and stimulates the necessary and inevitable debate amongst a wider public opinion on the contents of the accession process. I have written in detail on this parliamentary dimension[1] and would only underline here that if and when the national parliaments and the European Parliament come to ratify accession treaties, they must be sure to reflect and not to override public opinion. To do otherwise would potentially reignite the king of legitimacy crisis observable inside the EU in the early 1990's.

Each parliament has its own job to do. The national parliaments of the EU member states monitor the work of their respective Governments. As EU accession negotiations involve, inside the EU alone, 15 Governments and the Commission this will not be an easy task. The national parliaments of the candidate countries at least only have to monitor the work of one Government, but as negotiations take place in what is in fact an Intergovernmental Accession Conference of 16 governments, this is only a small advantage, especially given the fact that accession negotiations revolve essentially around if, how and when the candidates will accept the EU's own existing

---

1 Enlargement of the Union: the Parliamentary Dimension. Paper presented to the Conference of the international Studies Association held in Vienna in September 1998.

legislation. It is not a negotiation between equal parties.

At least as parliamentarians, members of the national parliaments of the candidate countries take part in separate Joint Parliamentary Committees with MEPs, where the delegations on each side are of equal dimensions. The MEPs have, however, the advantage of living their political lives inside the EU and therefore being informed about, as well as having influence upon, the EU's legislation, budget and policy development. MPs from the candidate countries can use the JPC's to learn more about where the EU's moving train may be headed, but they have no access to the engine room. National parliamentarians from the EU member states and the candidate countries meet regularly in the COSAC framework to discuss general EU developments, but it is much too large a framework to deal with the details of the accession negotiations themselves. It is in the JPC's and the European Affairs Committees, established by the candidate countries' parliaments that the negotiators and officials from the Commission and the relevant national governments come under pressure to provide details of the results of the screening process and of the outcome of the accession negotiations themselves. Since, however, nothing can be agreed in fact until the negotiations are definitely concluded, the national parliamentarians of the candidate countries will gradually come to terms with the very special kind of horse-trading which characterises EU negotiations. It is interesting to note also that just as the chief negotiators of the six candidates currently involved in the accession negotiations meet regularly to compare notes, so do to the Chairmen of the European Affairs Committees of the six national parliaments concerned. There are also regular meetings of the President of the European Parliament with the Presidents of the twelve countries involved in the enlargement process. This is a symbolic and informal reflection of the European Parliament's resistance to the early differentiation between different groups of candidate countries.

The JPC's do also provide, in themselves, a test of how deep parliamentary democracy and pluralism have taken root and in some cases the behaviour of parliamentarians from candidate countries surprises their MEP colleagues. There is a widespread inability to differentiate between critical observation and hostility as if questioning a minister's statement about his country's readiness to abide by EU rules was a challenge to his honesty. Similarly parliamentarians from opposition parties or media who use the JPC framework to criticise their country's government

have in Slovenia and Bulgaria come under attack for somehow letting down the national cause.

Clearly the parliaments of countries finding themselves outside the accession negotiations are concentrating their efforts on convincing the Commission and the EU member states that they too should join the accession negotiations. As the key to early accession lies more in timely preparations and the full implementation of the Accession Partnerships, the differentiation still existing in mid-1999 can also be seen as a source of a major misunderstanding amongst the "negotiating" countries who do not take too seriously Commission warnings that the opening of accession negotiations is not any guarantee of their successful conclusion. Frank discussion amongst parliamentarians can provide a firm reminder that there are no short cuts to accession and that countries slowing down their accession preparations, most notably the Czech Republic, could easily be left behind as further countries join accession negotiations themselves. The active participation of the Commission in the work of the JPC's is a confirmation of their usefulness as a framework for sending clear messages outside the diplomatic framework and into the heart of the candidate countries' political systems, so that no one is left with any illusions. In this way surprises in the negotiations can be minimised.

Parliaments originally played a role of establishing new relationships with Brussels and Strasbourg in the early 1990's, particularly after the entry into force of the various Europe Agreements, but their role becomes vital once accession negotiations get under way, and is of course decisive once the stage of ratification is reached. It is as that stage that the role of public opinion (including NGO's and representatives of sectoral interests) becomes impossible to minimise. Experience of referenda in the most recent entrants shows that public opinion should never be taken for granted. Norway and Switzerland's Government's ambitions to join in European integration remained stillborn as a result of their elites inability to carry along public opinion. Whilst Agh is right to argue that Parliaments should be the chief intermediaries between Governments and public opinion even their active role is not a guarantee of success. There was during Norway's second abortive attempt to join the EU a functioning JPC and an active national parliament. The people still voted 'No!!'

Looking at this last point first, public attitudes to European issues can partly be analysed in terms

of general issues concerning sovereignty or identity. In reality, however, people tend to be more concerned about their personal economic and social prospects than these issues which excite and divide the elites. It may be expected that inside the EU attitudes to enlargement will depend on the general or regional economic situation. Such issues as the possible loss of jobs through cheap competition or the arrival of immigrants ready to work locally for lower wages are likely to have most impact. The possible loss of what is perceived as valuable EU financial assistance is already playing a part in the still nascent debate inside the EU on its prospective enlargement[1]. The salience of such issues also depends where the question is put. Issues linked to the possible consequences of the free movement of labour are likely to be more important in countries and regions bordering on the countries hoping to accede to the EU. The decisions by the European Council in Berlin in March 1999 confirmed the national governments' hesitation to carry out the radical reforms of the CAP and the structural funds, as proposed by the Commission in its Agenda 2000, or to expand the EU budget as proposed by the European Parliament. The fact that decisions were taken at all reflected the EU's determination to maintain the momentum of the enlargement process, but the absence of real reforms confirmed the views of those jaded observers of EU matters who consider that decisions to undertake fundamental policy or institutional changes are only taken when leaders find themselves up against immediate deadlines. Part of the reason for delay in this case is that leaders found themselves under pressure from sections of public opinion where particular interests were at stake. The regions receiving aid from the structural funds, the farmers and taxpayers in general, are obvious examples. The key therefore for deeper understanding of public attitudes to enlargement inside the EU depends on sectoral or regional interests, rather than the general political purposes of enlargement in relation to peace and security, which is the source of the pressure on EU leaders to act in a way which maintains, or at least gives the appearance of maintaining what is known as momentum.

Public opinion will by definition be decisive during and, just after the closing phase of negotiations, since unless national leaders inside the EU are confident that enlargement will be accepted by their respective publics (or at least not the subject of any major domestic challenge), they will be hesitant to sign any accession treaties at all. General economic circumstances and possibly, (in the light of the war in Yugoslavia), international events will influence public attitudes

---

1 European Parliament Task Force Paper N° 41. Public Opinion and Enlargement.

at the decisive moment if and when it occurs. This aspect also confirms the unbalanced nature of the enlargement process reflected in the negotiations. EU Governments are under virtually no domestic pressure whatsoever to enlarge the EU. In crude electoral terms it would be hard to identify any significant group of electors in any EU member state which would be seriously concerned by an announcement by the EU or its respective national government that enlargement had been indefinitely postponed. An exception could perhaps be found in Greece which is keen to get Cyprus into the EU and where voters might be affected by the failure of their leaders to achieve this objective. Perhaps also in the countries of Scandinavia where leaders argued the case for accession, or for the two last EU treaties, in relation to the overriding importance of enlarging the EU to ensure peace and stability. When someone like Bulgaria's Prime Minister Kostov denounces the EU for its lack of vision, its meaningless dictates and the lack of urgency with which its leaders approach his country's EU ambitions, he should be encouraged to analyse the reasons for what he sees as this kind of discouragement[1]. Bulgaria faces tremendous problems which have been aggravated by the continuing conflict in the former Yugoslavia and the effective collapse of the Russian economy. This puts Mr Kostov under great pressure to improve his people's conditions and to produce some progress in relation to EU accession. Unfortunately the leaders Mr Kostov tried to influence in his recent outburst are not under any such pressure. When Bulgaria complains that the EU is being unreasonable in demanding the closure of a particular nuclear power station, he is right to point out the economic and social consequences and financial costs of such a step. The fact remains that the public in neighbouring Greece, which is at least sensitive to Bulgaria's concerns, is concerned at what it perceives to be Bulgaria's unwillingness to close down what is considered to be a dangerous nuclear installation just across its frontier. Given that Bulgaria, along with Romania, will have the greatest difficulty in meeting the criteria for EU membership in the medium term, its leaders would be better advised to concentrate on creating the conditions to overcome public indifference or hostility in the EU for their EU accession demands rather than attacking EU leaders for a lack of vision. Bulgaria and Romania are perhaps extreme examples to take, and their objective situation will always be confused in the public mind filled with images of endemic poverty, homelessness, pollution and rising crime. These prejudices may anger the leaders of the countries concerned but that is no reason for them to ignore their political consequences.

---

[1] Interview with Reuters; 1.3.99.

Arguments about the cost of enlargement also provide the occasion for politicians to provide a mixture of facts and hyperbole to provoke debate or to score domestic political points, as the Socialist leader in Spain did in March 1999, when he accused Prime Minister Aznar of selling out Spain's vital national interests in the Berlin deal on the future financing of the EU.

The candidate countries which are naturally looking for a speedy conclusion of accession regulations have to bear in mind the fact that the EU governments cannot assume that public opinion will easily accept EU enlargement. In countries such as France and Austria where extreme right parties have grown stronger in the last decade , major domestic arguments can be expected once accession treaties come up for ratification. Bearing in mind the divisive nature of such issues as the budget, the CAP and the institutions, the likelihood of such controversy is hard to overestimate.

The need for a cautious approach towards public opinion inside the EU is borne out by a summary of the findings of recent Eurobarometer surveys[1] which found for example that only 13% of EU citizens consider enlargement as a priority amongst the options facing the EU in its relations with countries seeking accession. 16% favoured keeping the EU at its current size and whilst only 5% wanted to leave the EU altogether, 55% felt that the EU should concentrate on its own internal problems. Eurobarometer also confirmed that there are great differences between public opinion in the various member states. Only in Denmark (61%) was a majority of public opinion actually clearly in favour of treating enlargement as a priority. In Greece (47%) and Sweden (49%) at least more people were in favour of this as a priority rather than being against it. In both Germany and France well under 20% took such a view which suggests that the decisions taken by the European Council in Berlin could be considered as modestly courageous under the circumstances. EU leaders would have looked feeble if they had failed to agree on the Agenda 2000 within their announced timetable. Following the Santer Commission's resignation decisive action was needed to reinstore confidence and a sense of direction, but on the specific issue of keeping up the pace of preparing the EU for enlargement the main leaders would not directly have lost any votes by failing to agree in Berlin.

---

1 Les Enjeux de l'Elargissement de l'Union Européenne dans l'Opinion Publique. Unpublished study for the European Commission (DG 10) by Olga Gille-Belova, 1998.

Describing the future enlargement as a "controversial operation" the study quoted did, however, find that the main lines of the EU's current approach to enlargement were supported by public opinion. 67% of EU citizens could see that the EU would be more important in world affairs after enlargement. 61% could see that Europe could be enriched culturally by enlargement. Nearly 60% felt an enlarged EU would give greater guarantees of peace and security in Europe. 54% felt that EU institutional reform should take place before enlargement. Similarly, with regard to the criteria for accession over 90%, considered that any future EU member state should respect human rights and democratic principles and over 70% considered that new member states should be in a position to implement the EU "acquis" or have a level of economic development which is near to that of current EU members.

Looking at public attitudes for each of the countries seeking accession, it is interesting to note that of the 6 countries now participating in the accession negotiations, four, (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Cyprus) are the only countries where a majority inside the EU came out clearly in favour of their joining. Slovenia and Estonia have recently gained or regained their national sovereignty and may just be less well known as candidates. The fact remains that 7 of the 10 countries from Central and Eastern Europe which are seeking to join the EU cannot take for granted that the support for their accession which is expressed by the EU institutions and national political leaders is backed up by their voters. Not surprisingly it is also the case that attitudes to each of the candidate countries varies considerably between the publics of the EU member states.Greeks are almost 90% in favour of Cypriot accession whilst only 30% of French people are in favour. This difference of approach was reflected in statements made at the opening of the EU/Cyprus Intergovernmental Accession Conference in Brussels on March 31st 1998. A similar wide range of attitudes is apparent with regard to the accession of the Baltic states and Poland. This situation means that candidate countries seeking to speeding their accession will have to market themselves vis à vis the public of all the EU member states, and not just rely on the "friends" they may have sitting across the negotiating table at the accession negotiations.

Leaving aside such special relationships and the question of their real utility in such a complex series of negotiations, the basic fact remains that in only 5 of the 15 EU member states is there a majority broadly in favour of the EU enlargement (Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Netherlands,

Finland). In 4 countries less than 30% take a similar view, most importantly France and Germany are in this group as is Austria along with Belgium. This cannot be considered as a solid basis in which to envisage a speeding up of negotiations or an early enlargement taking place without substantial controversy inside the EU.

This important political consideration is confirmed by the comparison with the degree of support within the EU for the enlargement now envisaged, as compared with the last series of accessions which in 1994 , a few months before enlargement, were supported by an average of 75% within the EU. To ignore this reality would indeed risk reigniting what is widely referred to as the Union's crisis of democratic legitimacy, a crisis which was only narrowly and with difficulty overcome in the early 1990's. The forces which led to this crisis are probably now lying dormant following the entry into force of the Single European Act, having remained undisturbed by the limited nature of the decisions made at the European Council meetings in Amsterdam in June 1997 and Berlin in March 1999.

Whilst the idea of enlargement is more widely understood, supported and viewed with a sense of urgency in the candidate countries, it would be a serious oversimplification to assume that accession is or will remain an uncontroversial issue amongst the citizens of the candidate countries themselves. The Eurobarometer simply confirms the range of opinions that exists.

Malta was not covered in this particular study, but it is clear that in this small country public opinion remains deeply divided on the issue of EU accession. The pro-EU Nationalist Party has promised a referendum on the subject, having accepted in advance that the 1998 General Election could not settle the issue. In the Baltic countries there is relatively low (around one third) support for EU accession. In Romania 90% want to join the EU. The specific reasons for these differences can be analysed, but the main lesson, particularly looking at the countries already in the accession negotiations, is that whilst in the candidate countries EU accession is considered more widely as a positive priority, the picture is complex and, as in any democracy, constantly evolving. A positive vote by, for example, Czech or Estonian voters in referenda on accession cannot be taken for granted whereas in the four other countries such an outcome is, at least, more likely. In all the candidate countries, moreover, there is a large group of citizens without any clear opinion.

Eurobarometer already signalled a substantial decline of support for accession in the candidate countries between 1995 and 1996, just as the Europe Agreeements were all beginning to function normally. The Commission study also suggested that citizens of the candidate countries had very limited and hazy knowledge of what joining the EU might actually mean. As Heather Grabbe And Kirsty Hughes[1] point out, this fact is probably a reflection of the fact that "there is little serious debate in the Central and East European Countries about the desirability of joining the EU". Political leaders and the media see joining the EU as part of their countries' "return to Europe" and treat it as something inevitable and intrinsically linked with their transitions to parliamentary democracy and a market economy. There is, therefore, no challenge to the view that full membership is the only option, an option which fulfills emotional and security needs.

There are similarities here with the early days of European integration when the process was elite-led, uncontroversial and highly political without any precise idea of the future developments. Discovering the EU as it is, with its 40 years of acquis, its single currency and its evolving political union, is therefore bound to be an unsettling experience to those who understandably take the idealistic purely political approach of the kind which inspired the European project in the first place. As Agh points out[2] sloganising about the "return to Europe" quickly becomes meaningless and is based upon a "low level of political and intellectual discourse" without any clear strategy to communicate to the public what EU accession might mean in concrete terms. In this way great expectations have led to quick disappointments, this he links to the "post-revolutionary hangover" or Eurofatigue of the populations of the former communist candidate countries.

A more settled and informed public opinion on the different aspects of enlargement is, therefore, still emerging inside and outside the EU. Precisely because political leaders and the media have tended to present an excessively positive view of the political benefits of accession, a more

---

1 H. Grabbe and K. Hughes: Central and Eastern European news EU Enlargement, in Henderson op.cit., p 188.

2 Attila Agh: Budapest Paper N° 221, p 17.

balanced view has not been able to emerge. As attention shifts to the practical questions (costs, sovereignty, identity, legal system, land acquisition, etc.) a major test of the strengh of the emerging democracies will take place. The elites will have to handle the challenge from different sectors of society concerned about the possible negative consequences of accession, at the same time as they come up against the tough and unbalanced reality of their accession negotiations. Negotiations where the EU not only holds all the cards but is under no pressure whatsoever from its own public opinion to make concessions to the candidates. As the domestic debate hots up in the acceding countries the relatively few sources of information about the EU (national governments, the Commission) which tend to present a very positive picture, will be supplemented by other sources of information (local authorities, industrial sectors, NGOs) which will be looking at accession in terms of their particular interests rather than in broad terms of national political destiny. Such issues as the impact on agriculture, the environmental and social costs will come to the fore. In fact if EU accession really is to be the inevitable consequence of the 1989 democratic revolution, the accession process and its acceptance by the public will be a test of the stability of these democratic systems. The sense of extreme urgency reflected by the candidate countries' governments and negotiations seems to suggest a fear that a delay would be accompanied by a further decline in public support for this objective. This is virtually the opposite of the situation inside the EU where the democratic process is producing virtually no desire to speed up enlargement. Indeed speeding it up (perhaps as a response to the war in Yugoslavia), could produce the kind of fear of enlargement within the EU which could derail the whole process. The difference of approach on the different sides of the negotiating table does not suggest that one side is operating more democratically than the other, it is just that democracy is putting the two sides under completely different kinds of pressure.

Irena Brinar[1] has analysed the passage from "Europhoria" to "Euro(realism)" in Slovenia. Between 1993 and 1996 there was a big drop in the number of Slovenians with a positive attitude towards the EU. This reflected an evolution from "high and rather idealistic expectations" to a recognition that the EU is not, in fact, an ideal association and that questions of differing national interests remain fundamental. Slovenians have in fact merely come to a more balanced, informed and realistic view of what the EU will mean for Slovenia. This would seem to be a positive

---

1 Irena Brinar: Slovenia - from Yugoslavia to EU in Henderson op.cit., p 252.

assessment of Slovenia's test of democracy in relation to EU accession and indeed Brinar is right to point out that such a pragmatic, oscillating view of EU membership is rather similar to that of most of the EU countries themselves, where the EU is subject to substantial criticism without the idea of membership itself being called into question except by fringe parties. It is also the case that European issues have been particularly controversial in Slovenia, a fact which has stimulated parliamentary and public debate.

Poland has also been the scene of lively arguments in the Government and the Parliament as well as demonstrations in the streets, as profound concerns about the precise economic and social consequences of accession replace the political aspect at the centre of public interest in relation to EU accession. The use of PHARE money, restructuring of the steel industry, respect for EU competition rules have all become regular subjects of concern. Some church leaders express the fear that, inside the EU, Poland's Catholic identity could be threatened. Eurosceptic elements are present in the Government. Again since the majority in society and in Parliament remain committed to the aim of accession, such controversy should be seen as a positive sign that democracy has, indeed, firmly taken over in Poland.

Overselling of the advantages of membership, ignoring the inevitable problems or (worse) pretending as Chancellor Kohl and President Chirac used to do that, the year 2000 would have been the year of Poland's accession is counterproductive. It encourages euroscepticism but what is worse, it could in due course undermine the Poles' faith in their democratic system. This danger is unlikely to prove unmanageable precisely because most of the candidate countries plan referenda on accession. Democratisation and enlargement will, in this way, be linked together as part of the same process. Positions taken by political parties will have to become more sophisticated, combining high politics and low politics. Any attempt to concentrate on the former in order to distract attention from the latter was, anyway, bound to fail. Most importantly, the result of the more pragmatic approach on the part of the candidate countries will put them in a stronger position to influence the evolution of the EU itself. Before they reach that stage, however, they must be sure that their citizens are ready for the EU. A defeat for the pro-EU forces in any of the candidate countries would indeed create the political uncertainty and basis for a purely nationalistic politics of the kind which could, in due course, undermine the democratic

achievements of the last decade.

Controversy, divisions, uncertainty and competition for public support are the normal characteristics of a democratic society. Inside the EU it is now taken for granted that each step forward in European integration will be challenged and that nothing involving public acceptance can be taken for granted. Countries emerging into a democratic dawn are bound to have a different outlook, and it is these differences between political life and recent history inside and outside the EU which makes for a gulf in understanding between elected representatives from the two sides.

As Gale Stokes has put it, Eastern Europe, since 1989 has lived through the sudden reemergence of many problems which were kept below the ground. Ethnic politics is just the most explosive of such problems, and as she points out, Western Europe has had generations of experience to cope with pluralism. Experience in Ireland or Corsica, or the continuing problems of racism and xenophobia should lead to caution about the relative superiority of Western European democracy. Many current EU member states do not have generations of democratic experience and yet their EU membership seems to make an undemocratic regression unlikely. Stokes is right, however, to point out that in Central and Eastern Europe its citizens and institutions are not just trying to adapt to the requirements of the market economy or the EU, they are recreating their constitutional systems, their political parties, their health and social security, their education systems and "confronting many other issues that in major ways have long been regulated in the west. When one couples the sheer magnitude of the problems with the special shrillness in politics that comes from a compromised past, the wonder is not that the East Europeans are having difficulties, but that they are accomplishing anything at all"[1]. Her conclusion is that Eastern Europe is not (any longer) in transition but is now having to face the normal struggles and bitterness of pluralist political life.

Both sides can, therefore, be seen engaged in a common exercise involving redefinition of their national political systems in the context of a continuously changing European reality. The sacrifice of sovereignty required of countries joining the EU will never be easy. The fact that most of the

---

1 Gale Stokes: Three Eras and political Change in Eastern Europe, Oxford U.P. 1997, p 202.

12 countries currently involved in the enlargement process are so small in relative terms, (and some are very small), will bring them straight into the heart of the EU's most intractable problems in terms of democratisation. These are the issues of the weighting of votes in the Council of Ministers and the make-up of the Commission. Whatever terms Lithuania, for example, manages to negotiate to join the EU, the basic political fact will remain that its population is already equal to less than 1% of the EU's current population, (which itself is set to grow by 25% as a result of enlargement). Its economic weight is even smaller. This is bound to have political consequences and, therefore, when it comes under pressure from the EU to take the costly step of closing down its main domestic energy source, (a nuclear power plant), the real balance of forces between itself and the EU is all too clear. It is also clear that public opinion cannot fail to see what is happening. Similar issues will arise in all the candidate countries. Luxembourg is, for now, lucky with its 6 MEPs out of 626; the new member states will feel very small, with possibly even fewer members, in a European Parliament with a maximum of 700 members. As Michael Emerson has put it "the forthcoming institutional reforms and enlargement of the EU boil down to a few numbers"[1]. He is right, but they are very controversial numbers indeed.

The purpose of drawing attention to the controversial and uncertain democratic dimension of the enlargement process is not to undermine it, but to remind all those committed to its success that an enlarged, democratised EU will require legitimation and acceptance by its citizens. The enlargement of the EU will, indeed, contribute to democratic stability in Europe. An enlarged EU should see the expansion of democracy in Europe as one of its principle objectives, and indeed, purposes of its very existence.

This can only be achieved if it is perceived as a process. The EU has accepted that it needs to change to enlarge and the issues raised, (from CAP to institutional reform), have been widely aired in the political system and in public debate for most of the past 20 years already. The candidate countries perhaps, initially, underestimated the enormity of the step they were taking in presenting their applications for membership.

It is perhaps too easy to present the issues at stake in terms of a purely positive form of

---

1 Michael Emerson: Redrawing the Map of Europe. MacMillan 1998, p 230.

interdependence where everyone emerges a winner. Agh[1] sees democratisation, "marketisation" and nation-building as combined processes for the reorganisation of society and as a pre-conditions for europeanisation. The European Union's strategy for enlargement is based on the hope that these combined processes will, indeed, prove successful and irreversible. It is certainly too early to say, whether a positive rather than a negative feed-back between the different transformations taking place in former communist countries will always occur. Indeed, as europeanisation becomes the dominant element, there could be challenges to previously achieved changes in the other transformation processes. The pressure for competition between political parties as well as an increased ability of sectoral interest groups to stand up for their particular interests could still threaten the whole process.

It is, however, all too clear that failure to enlarge would be as damaging a failure for the EU as failure to stay on course for accession would be for any candidate country. The early years of the 21st century will therefore provide an epoch-making answer to the question as to whether or not Europeans have learned the lessons of the 20th century and are able to continue the process of stabilising democracy and security in the framework of political integration: a process which was begun in the aftermath of a war caused by fascism and nazism and which has now found a new inspiration and sense of purpose following the collapse of communism.

---

1 Attila Agh: The Politics of Central Europe, SAGE 1998, p 216.