

## The Death of Enlargement

For many years, European politicians could broadly be divided into two camps: deepeners and wideners. The deepeners, such as former head of the European Commission Jacques Delors and current Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt, believed above all in pursuing the political integration of the European Union. Their aim was, as Verhofstadt writes frankly in the title of a recent book, to create a “United States of Europe.”<sup>1</sup> The wideners, epitomized by former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher (Delors’s arch enemy), were keen to expand the membership of the EU to include all the post-Communist countries of eastern and central Europe. They wanted to spread the political and economic benefits of EU membership as broadly as possible, but they were also often attracted to EU enlargement for other, more self-serving reasons. They believed that the larger the EU was, the more diverse it would become, and the more difficult it would be to achieve the deepeners’ goal of a united Europe.

Not surprisingly, wideners and deepeners were often highly suspicious of each other. Each side suspected, often correctly, that the other was intent on sabotaging their pet project. Yet, each side missed an essential point: for at least 20 years, the widening and deepening of the EU have not been opposing and hostile projects. On the contrary, they have proceeded in tandem. The EU kept expanding, but the process of “ever closer union,” laid out in the Treaty of Rome in 1957, also kept rolling forward. Spain, Greece, and Portugal were admitted to the European club in the 1980s after undergoing democratic revolutions. In the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, the EU committed to creating a single currency, the euro, and a common foreign policy. In 2004, 10 central European countries were finally formally admit-

---

Gideon Rachman is business editor of the *Economist* and was its Brussels bureau chief from 2001 to 2005.

---

© 2006 by The Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
*The Washington Quarterly* • 29:3 pp. 51–56.

ted to the EU as full members, alongside Cyprus and Malta, expanding EU membership to 25 countries. That same year, EU leaders agreed on the union's first written constitution, a move intended to push it toward a new and deeper level of political integration.

There was a certain logic to the fact that widening and deepening were proceeding alongside each other. The EU works by compromise and trade-off; a concession to the wideners was often matched by a concession to the deepeners. Each position in the EU's widening versus deepening debate can

**The widening and deepening of the EU have not been opposing and hostile projects.**

be identified with particular national positions. The British were always wideners, viscerally opposed to all moves toward political union. The French were always deepeners, wary of the impact of enlargement on France's traditional preeminence within the EU. The Germans, however, have traditionally supported both positions. Because it would create new markets for German industry and stabilize Germany's borders, they could see a strong national interest in expanding the EU

eastward. Yet, the German establishment was also still profoundly attached to the idea of a united Europe that could aspire to an assertive international role still unthinkable for modern Germany.

Some politicians, leading German ones such as former chancellor Helmut Kohl and former foreign minister Joschka Fischer in particular, therefore managed to be enthusiastic wideners and deepeners at the same time. They argued that enlarging the EU and pushing for a political union, far from being mutually antagonistic policies, only made sense if pursued simultaneously. According to this argument, it was precisely because enlargement would make the EU more diverse that a closer political union was increasingly necessary. Without moves toward political union, the EU would become ungovernable.

The Germans' characteristically dialectical position, that two apparently opposing policies could be united to create a new synthesis that would advance the European project as a whole, seemed for many years to be more prescient and generous spirited than the more fearful and competitive British and French positions. It helped that the German position was also shared by the Brussels establishment, above all by the permanent, powerful civil service of the European Commission, both for practical and ideological reasons. The commission supported enlargement partly because it was a project that it managed and partly because its successful completion could only add to the EU's as well as its own size and grandeur. For similar reasons, the

commission was also traditionally the most federalist, i.e., pro-political union, institution within the EU. The commission, after all, tends to attract employees who believe in “Europe.” And more power for Europe tends also to mean more power for the commission.

## The French and Dutch Referenda

---

The Germans and the commission were correct to believe that enlargement and the promotion of political union could go hand in hand. Yet, it is now becoming clear that the reverse is also true. If the process of political union is blocked, then enlargement could be stopped in its tracks.

This new logic has become apparent in the wake of the French referendum on the EU constitution in May 2005. France rejected the constitution by 54 percent to 46 percent. A few days later, Dutch voters rejected the constitution by an even greater margin. The French vote in particular was widely interpreted as a vote against the EU enlargement that had taken place a year earlier as much as against the constitutional text that had been placed before French voters. The iconic figure during the campaign was the “Polish plumber” who was apparently poised to move to France, driving down wages and social standards through his willingness to work for low wages and in inhumane conditions. The services directive, a draft European law that made it easier for Polish plumbers and other service providers to work across the EU, became a subject of fierce debate in the French campaign, even though it did not feature in the constitutional text.

The fact that the French vote appeared to be driven by issues that were not strictly germane to the constitutional text has confirmed the worst fears of many political analysts about direct democracy and referenda. The problem is that, as the late French president François Mitterand is reputed to have remarked, the voters never answer the question you ask them. Yet, in fact, it was not entirely irrational for French voters to link their fear of enlargement with their dislike of the constitution. The constitutional treaty consolidated all previous European treaties and laws into a single text. Exasperated pro-Europeans pointed out that many of the items to which French rejectionists objected, such as free movement of people between all EU countries, had been part of European law for many years. That was true, but in a post-enlargement environment it was also arguably beside the point. Agreeing to a single market between countries with broadly similar income levels and similar cultures is one thing. Given that some of the new EU member states had wage levels that were just 20 percent of those in France, however, it is not entirely surprising that French voters were slightly alarmed by the prospect of head-to-head competition with Polish plumbers and Slovak auto workers.

The question of culture also loomed large in the French and Dutch referendum campaigns. Caucasian Polish Catholics were not regarded as particularly threatening, but voters were acutely aware that the largest country sitting in the EU's waiting room is Turkey, a Muslim nation on Europe's periphery with alarming neighbors such as Iraq. Whenever French and Dutch politicians protested that the prospect of Turkish membership was still a very long way off, the "no" campaigns could point out that the Turks were present at the constitutional convention that drew up the treaty and that the Turkish prime minister was among the European leaders who signed the document at a formal ceremony in Rome. The idea of untrammelled immigration from Turkey was always likely to be highly controversial in two countries where Muslim immigration has helped created political upheaval in recent years, leading to the rise of an entirely new political movement in the Netherlands, the List Pim Fortuyn, and contributing to the embarrassing appearance of a far-right candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the final runoff for the French presidency in 2002.

In an effort to win their referendum and head off a revolt based on fear of enlargement in general and Turkey in particular, the French government made a fateful promise. After the admission of Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia to the EU, all future enlargements would be subjected to a referendum. This is not an entirely new departure. The French had a referendum on British membership in the 1970s. (Amazingly enough, given the history of mutual antagonism between the two countries, they voted in favor.) In general, however, successive EU enlargements have been passed in parliaments without direct consultation with the people.

Because all member states have to ratify any enlargement, parliamentary ratification may be the only practical route to pursue in a 25-member EU. By abandoning this tradition and writing the promise to have a referendum on future enlargements into the French constitution, France has thrown grave doubt on the future of EU enlargement. It is not alone. Austria, where skepticism about eventual Turkish membership is also rampant, has also promised its people that they will get to vote on Turkish membership. Because referendum promises tend to snowball, it is likely that many EU countries will eventually feel compelled to vote on future enlargements.

### **Tough Choices Ahead: Turkey, the Balkans, and Ukraine**

---

Because Europe's most difficult cases now beckon, this anxiety is all the more acute. There is little doubt that the current political climate within the EU is unfavorable to Turkey, which excites western European fears of Muslim immigration and competition from low-wage labor. Because many EU laws are passed by majority vote and a country's voting power is based on its popula-

tion, the fact that Turkey might be the largest single nation within the EU by 2030 based on current population trends also counts against it.

It is less than a decade since Europeans and Americans had to intervene militarily in the Balkans. The area is now at peace but clearly remains unstable, with final state boundaries still to be settled and old enmities lurking just beneath the surface. Almost all foreign observers closely involved with the region are convinced that the prospect of eventual EU membership is indispensable to driving further political reform and cementing democracy. The fear is that if the prospect of EU membership disappears off the political agenda, the Balkans may slip back into instability. Olli Rehn, the EU's enlargement commissioner, warned bluntly on March 15, 2006, that "[i]f we were to go wobbly about the western Balkans' European perspective, our beneficial influence would be severely eroded, just when the region enters a difficult period for talks on Kosovo's status."<sup>2</sup> Signs of just such a wobble became apparent at an EU summit in Salzburg that same month, when EU leaders for the first time qualified their commitment to enlargement with a reference to the EU's "absorption capacity."<sup>3</sup>

The countries of the western Balkans have at least been explicitly offered the prospect of eventual EU membership. No such promise has been made to Ukraine, however, and the political consequences of that lack of generosity may now be emerging. After Ukraine's Orange Revolution, newly elected president Victor Yushchenko made the drive for eventual EU membership a central part of his political strategy. Yet, he was undermined by his failure to receive almost any encouragement from Brussels, which also may well have contributed to his defeat in parliamentary elections in March 2006. The setback for Yushchenko and the rebound in the fortunes of the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich threaten to undermine all efforts to bring Ukraine into a stable, democratic, and prosperous European community and to pull the country away from Russia's orbit. If Ukraine, with its size and strategic significance, is rebuffed, other smaller countries such as Belarus, which is still under authoritarian rule, and newly democratic Georgia are likely to be similarly discouraged.

The threat that the EU enlargement process may now die a lingering and public death is potentially a huge blow to the EU and its goal of spreading prosperity and democracy into its wider neighborhood. The EU's aspirations to have a powerful, common foreign policy have generally not met with much success in the wider world, but in its "near abroad," the EU has had one extremely powerful foreign policy tool: the promise of eventual membership, with all the benefits in terms of security, prosperity, and personal opportunity

Because Europe's most difficult cases now beckon, anxiety is all the more acute.

for prospective new members it implies. A senior EU official joked that, “[o]nce a country applies to join the European Union, they become our slaves.”<sup>4</sup> That is not quite the case, but it is certainly true that proud countries such as Poland have proved willing to rewrite their domestic law from top to bottom to qualify for EU membership. EU diplomats have proudly compared their ability to spread democracy and the rule of law through peaceful

**Brussels does not want to admit the difficulties the enlargement process is now facing.**

persuasion with the more muscular approach that the United States has favored in Iraq. Yet, the awful prospect is now dawning that the EU, if it were to discard enlargement, would be throwing away its only effective foreign policy tool.

Although eventual EU membership for the countries of the Balkans and Turkey is now clearly in doubt, this does not mean that the prospect of EU membership has completely lost its potency as a spur to re-

form in those countries. Fortunately, it is not in the interests of either the Brussels authorities or the applicant countries to acknowledge just how much trouble the enlargement process is in. The Turkish government, for example, has placed so much emphasis on its drive for EU membership that to accept that the prospect of membership is actually receding would involve a serious and destabilizing loss of face. The government of Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan may also find the demands made by Brussels a useful spur to domestic reforms that it wants to make anyway, regardless of whether negotiations eventually lead to membership.

For their part, the European authorities in Brussels do not want to admit the difficulties the enlargement process is now facing because to do so would involve acknowledging the deep troubles faced by the EU as an institution as well as jettisoning a powerful tool for influencing the behavior of the EU’s neighbors. For the moment, therefore, the enlargement dance can continue, but when the music stops and the lights go up, all parties involved risk suffering a bitter disillusionment.

## Notes

---

1. Guy Verhofstadt, *The United States of Europe* (London: Federal Trust for Education and Research, 2006).
2. “Rehn and MEPs Warn Against ‘Wobbly’ Messages to Balkans,” *EU Observer*, March 16, 2006.
3. Ibid.
4. EU official, conversation with author, Brussels, January 2003.