

Ireland's accession

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Ireland had been a possession of the Kings of England since the Middle Ages and harboured strong resentment against its former rulers. The open wounds caused by many centuries of domination and by the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921) were still evident. The aftermath of those events and the partition of the island (1920) offer a partial explanation of Ireland's political and military neutrality and of its refusal in 1949 to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, a move which would have forced the country to recognise the frontier separating the two Irelands.

From an economic viewpoint, accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) posed a vital question for Ireland. The Emerald Isle still had close economic links with the United Kingdom, which absorbed some 75 % of its exports. Ireland's application for accession was therefore very closely linked to that submitted by the United Kingdom, to which country it had also been connected by a free trade agreement since 1965. This explains why its application had been abandoned on two occasions, in 1963 and 1967, following the French veto against the British application for accession.

Ireland was still a largely rural country. Half its exports were agricultural products and its economy was less developed than that of the other EEC countries, even though it had made significant progress since the early 1960s and an increasing number of foreign companies were setting up there. Although there was a danger that this backwardness might cause major difficulties in adaptation, Irish small farmers hoped first and foremost to benefit from the common agricultural policy (CAP), while at the same time gaining access to new markets. This would allow a gradual reduction in dependence on the British and would attract new investors. Irish negotiators managed in particular to obtain certain concessions regarding fishing rights and Community structural and regional aid.

The referendum in Ireland

On 10 May 1972, 70 % of Irish voters went to the polls to vote on the ratification of the Treaty of Accession. The result of the referendum was no surprise: 81 % of the Irish supported entry into the European Economic Community (EEC), the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) and the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC).