

## 'Long-awaited reunification in Eastern Europe' from Libération (17 April 2003)

**Caption:** The day following the signing of the Accession Treaty by the ten new Member States on 16 April 2003 in Athens, the French daily newspaper Libération emphasises the special nature of the fifth enlargement of the European Union. With a view to shake off their Communist past for good and become part of free Europe once again, the new democracies of Eastern Europe come to terms with a difficult transitional period involving the adaptation of their institutions and their legal and economic systems.

**Source:** Libération. 17.04.2003. Paris. "Une réunification tant attendue à l'Est", auteur:Soulé, Véronique , p. 14.

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## Long-awaited reunification in Eastern Europe

### The former ‘people’s democracies’ have fought hard for acceptance

VÉRONIQUE SOULÉ

The treaty signed in Athens yesterday is the culmination of over 10 years of struggle by the former Eastern bloc countries to throw off their Communist past and rejoin the democratic camp. After the disillusionment that built up in the course of the Brussels negotiations, it marks the long-awaited reunification of Europe at the end of 45 years of Soviet rule, bringing a painful period in history to a close.

**Freedom regained.** From Warsaw to Prague, Budapest to Vilnius, a ‘*return to Europe*’ was one of the main watchwords of the peaceful ‘revolutions’ that took place after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. When the totally discredited Communist regimes collapsed one after the other with virtually no opposition, the people were already dreaming of rejoining the neighbours in the West from whom they had been arbitrarily separated. Westerners were moved when they saw on their TV screens the jubilant crowds regaining their freedom. It seemed clear to everyone that Europe would be reunified and, indeed, that that was an easily achievable goal.

The people of the new democracies in Eastern Europe were the first to become disillusioned. Believing that they would be welcomed with open arms, they realised that the process would not be that simple. Instead, the initial enthusiasm was replaced by indifference and even a degree of mistrust. These applicant States wanting to become part of Europe are certainly poor. They might have huge industrial complexes and State farms, but their technology is outdated, their productivity low and their consumer products decidedly old-fashioned. These newcomers are likely to be a burden.

**Radical criteria.** After giving the go-ahead to the principle of enlargement, the Fifteen set the rules for the applicant countries. The ‘criteria’ for evaluating their progress were radical. They had to become viable democracies with functioning institutions — Parliament, judicial system, civil service, etc. They were also expected to establish market economies, which meant restructuring and large-scale bankruptcies. Lastly, they had to bring their legislation into line with the much vaunted ‘*acquis communautaire*’, requiring them to adopt thousands of laws. To help them, Brussels sent armies of experts and offered funding.

The attitude on both sides now is realistic. The Fifteen are considering how much of a burden these new countries will be. When they become members, they will still be poorer than were Spain and Portugal at the time when they acceded. In some quarters there is apprehension about the cost of enlargement and the prospect of having to share the benefits of Community subsidies. The applicant countries, on the other hand, are critical of the ‘*selfish attitudes*’ of the Fifteen and feel that they are being harshly treated. Hitherto, they had tended to see their accession as their due, a historic act of justice that would have compensated them for all their misfortunes.

**Profit and loss.** Accordingly, a misunderstanding has gradually developed. By placing greater emphasis on the profit and loss aspect in the accession negotiations, the Fifteen have reached an impasse in the European political project, reinforcing the utilitarian view of the EU held by many of the applicant countries. With the end in sight, however, the former ‘peoples’ democracies’ are not rejecting their good fortune. After their achievements in making the transition, they have, without any question, won their place in Europe.