

## The accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden to the European Union

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## The accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden to the European Union

The negotiations for accession to the European Union began on 1 February 1993. The applicant countries were required to accept the *acquis communautaire*, the full body of Community legislation adopted hitherto, as well as the provisions of the EU Treaty. However, they requested certain derogations, which made some areas of the negotiations difficult, in particular agriculture, regional aid, contribution to the Community budget and the setting of fishing quotas. Among the Twelve, several countries wanted the negotiations to reach a swift conclusion: Germany had a vested interest in enlarging the Union to include Austria, and the United Kingdom and Denmark likewise to include the Nordic countries. This led to last-minute concessions being made on Community aid, farm subsidies and fisheries.

The EU institutions, however, faced very serious problems. With the arrival of the new Member States, the number of votes in the Council increased, as did, in turn, the blocking minority. The UK opposed the increase of this blocking minority so that it could weaken the decision-making process, making a qualified majority more difficult to attain. Spain adopted the same position for fear of seeing its northern neighbours dominate the Union at the expense of the Mediterranean countries. The European Commission, the European Parliament, France and the Benelux countries deplored the potential deadlock that this would bring about. The fierce debate finally resulted in the adoption of a complex compromise on 29 March 1994 in Ioannina. This took the form of a Council decision which was not enshrined in the Treaty so as to avoid the need for further ratifications.

Accordingly, it was left to the European Parliament to give its 'assent' (i.e. its approval) on the text of the future Accession Treaty, a procedure introduced by the Single European Act (SEA) to cover the accession of new Member States, although Parliament still had no power to make amendments to the text. MEPs, however, voiced their discontent. Since 1991, they had been calling for enlargement of the Union to be preceded by a debate on the strengthening of the institutions, but in vain. Accordingly, some called for the vote to be postponed so that the issue could be discussed. However, the fourth European elections were due to be held from 9 to 12 June 1994, and the governments of the Twelve did not want to wait for Parliament to reconvene in the autumn as, given the ratification process that had to be completed in Member States, time would run out before the scheduled accession of the applicant countries on 1 January 1995. They therefore exerted great pressure on MEPs to resolve the situation quickly. Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany and the Heads of Government of the three Benelux countries promised MEPs that they would be involved in the preparations for institutional reform scheduled for discussion at the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on the revision of the Maastricht Treaty in 1996. However, Parliament could act only in a consultative capacity on this issue.

In the end, the MEPs agreed not to postpone the debate, thereby avoiding a crisis. They agreed to put the issue to the vote at the part-session held from 2 to 6 May and approved the Accession Treaty by a very large majority. Accordingly, the Treaty was able to be signed during the European Council meeting held on 24 and 25 June 1994 in Corfu under the Greek Council Presidency.

The ratifications in Member States remained to be secured. These were put through the parliaments of the Twelve without any difficulty. For their part, the applicant countries held referendums on whether to accede to the Union. Austria was the first to approve the ratification on 12 June, even before it had signed the Accession Treaty, by a large majority: 66.6 % voted 'Yes' in an 82.3 % turnout. Finland followed suit on 16 October with a 56.9 % majority (74 % turnout), and Sweden on 13 November with a 52.2 % majority (82.4 % turnout). As for Norway, it had said 'No' to the Accession Treaty in 1972, so the hope on this occasion was that, by being the last to vote, it would be swept along by its neighbours. However, in the referendum held on 28 November, with a massive turnout of 88.4 %, the 'No' camp again emerged victorious with 52.2 % of the vote. Norway would consequently not accede to the Union, although it remained a member of the European Economic Area (EEA). In the three Nordic countries, the cities and southern regions provided the highest proportion of pro-Europeans, whereas rural areas, fishing communities and northern regions provided most of the Euro-sceptics.

The EU institutions were then adjusted so as to accommodate the three new Member States. Each of them

would now have one European Commissioner. In the European Parliament, Sweden would have 22 MEPs, Austria 21 and Finland 16. In the Council of Ministers, Austria and Sweden would each have 4 votes and Finland 3. On 1 January 1995, the Union of the Twelve became the Union of the Fifteen. The Maastricht Treaty, entering into force on 1 November 1993, was therefore implemented by 15 Member States.