

'The EES – A timely concept' from the EFTA Bulletin (July–September 1990)

Caption: In summer 1990, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ongoing transformations in Eastern Europe, the monthly publication EFTA Bulletin welcomes the political impact of the establishment of the European Economic Space (EES), later to become the European Economic Area (EEA), as a prelude to a new architecture in Europe.

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The EES – a timely concept

When in January 1989, the President of the EC Commission, Jacques Delors, proposed to the EFTA countries “a more structured partnership with common decision-making and administrative institutions”, he underlined that this new concept would also enhance the political dimension of EC-EFTA cooperation.

At that moment, nobody could foresee that the years 1989 and 1990 would bring about the most profound changes in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Today, the political dimension of the European Economic Space which at the time of Mr Delors’ speech may have passed somewhat unnoticed in the EFTA countries, is about to take its real meaning, at the very instant when EFTA-EC negotiations on the EES have begun.

At their summit meeting in Gothenburg in mid-June, the Heads of Government and Ministers of the EFTA countries expressed the view “that a closer partnership between the EC and EFTA within an EES would be of great political importance for the reshaping of the European architecture and would strengthen the common capacity to offer inspiration and support to the new democracies in Europe” (see Gothenburg Declaration on page 11).

The same idea was echoed a week later in Brussels by the EFTA chairman of the High-Level Negotiating Group at the outset of the formal EES negotiations. He stated on behalf of the EFTA countries that a dynamic and homogeneous EES was a timely concept in view of developments in Europe as a whole and that these developments added to the urgency of establishing the EES. In this context he mentioned that the EC and EFTA countries had a shared responsibility for assisting the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in their efforts toward political and economic reform. Developments in Europe – and in the world – since June have given additional force to this point of view.

The EFTA countries already demonstrated their sense of responsibility for Europe as a whole at the end of last year, when, in addition to their bilateral efforts, they joined forces with the Community and other Western countries in the framework of the “Group of 24” and later in the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. They recently gave further proof of their willingness to take concrete steps in favour of Eastern European countries when they signed, at the Gothenburg summit, Declarations of Co-operation with Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland (see Declaration with Hungary, page 22).

Between the end of September and the middle of November, the three Joint Committees created by the Declarations will hold their first meetings. High-ranking representatives of the EFTA countries and the countries concerned will discuss concrete proposals in the areas of trade, economic, industrial, technological and scientific cooperation, tourism, transport and telecommunications as well as environmental protection – an area where the three countries have urgent problems and where the EFTA countries can offer their considerable expertise. Meanwhile, the traditional co-operation between EFTA and Yugoslavia, which has in many ways set the pattern for these new undertakings, continues. EFTA participates in the Zagreb Autumn Fair and the Joint EFTA-Yugoslavia Committee will meet in November.

The Gothenburg Declarations are considered, both by EFTA and the three countries concerned, as a first step. The Declarations already contain the seeds of further development, as the EFTA countries have declared themselves prepared to examine jointly with Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia conditions for the gradual establishment of free trade areas. It is generally recognized that in order to reach genuine free trade, a number of basic economic conditions must be met, which is not yet the case in the three countries concerned (see article on page 19). Nevertheless, discussions on future free trade agreements will start as soon as the Joint Committees meet.

The fact that this new opening to the East takes place at the same time as the EES negotiations is more than just a coincidence. It shows that EFTA does not see the EES in isolation, but as a building block of what has come to be called the “new architecture of Europe” in which all countries of our continent should eventually find their place. At a time when the EES is still “in the making”, it may seem premature to think of its potential all-European role, but the EFTA and EC negotiators will certainly bear the wider dimension of the

future EES in mind. Once completed, it should remain an open concept and allow for the later adaptation, in one form or another, of the countries of Eastern Europe to European integration. Such considerations could certainly qualify as subjects of the political dialogue foreseen at the last EFTA-EC ministerial meeting of December 1989.