

Interview with José Medeiros Ferreira: Portugal's application for accession to the European Communities (Lisbon, 25 October 2007)

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[Miriam Mateus] On 28 March 1977 ...

[José Medeiros Ferreira] A historic date ...

[Miriam Mateus] Portugal became the 11th country to submit a formal application to accede to the European Communities. I believe that you monitored that process a little ...

[José Medeiros Ferreira] Not a little, I monitored it very closely, because I was Minister for Foreign Affairs, so all the diplomatic and political steps went through my office and, naturally, through the Prime Minister's office.

[Miriam Mateus] And what were the key elements that made Portugal apply at that time?

[José Medeiros Ferreira] The key elements? First, our objective was to accede to the EEC. Then, our assessment was as follows: the revolutionary period in Portugal had been so troubled and uncertain that we needed to demonstrate, both to Portuguese society and to Europe, that our development was firmly established and that we adhered to international standards. We also felt that the European Community Member States could hardly say 'no' to Portugal at that time, which is why we decided that the application for accession should be a rapid process.

In other words, our feeling was that Europe had been relatively shocked at what was happening in Portugal and that the best way to clear the political air and to create an area of calm in the Iberian Peninsula was for Portugal's application for accession to be accepted, particularly since Spain itself was preparing for a political transition from the Franco dictatorship to a democratic regime. At that time, nobody really knew what the transition would involve, so the speed of the application for accession, as I said, was also based on the expectation that Spain itself would have a democratic regime sooner or later. And it was logical that Spain would also apply for accession to the EEC. So it would make no sense for Portugal, which had already taken part in other forms of European economic integration, such as EFTA, to fall behind in that process, not least because it was better prepared in terms of free trade and openness to external markets than Spain, which had worked hard to industrialise, principally with regard to its internal market.

So the application for accession drawn up by the first constitutional Government in Portugal, in which I was Minister for Foreign Affairs and which was led by Mário Soares ... was rapid because our objective was to accede to the European Community, because the EC countries could hardly say 'no' to a Portuguese application at that time and also because Spain was expected to accede to the European Community as soon as it could, or in other words, as soon as it had a democratic regime.

I don't think that I'm being wise after the event here. I'll say again that it's set down in the first constitutional Government's foreign policy strategy. So, from that point of view, those were the assumptions underlying the application for accession, as I usually call them, and I'll add another one which is connected to Portuguese decolonisation in 1975: the fall of the dictatorship and the revolutionary process in Portugal. The years 1974 and 1975 were marked by decolonisation, which was, moreover, one cause — if not the main cause — of the fall of the dictatorship at the time. It was a war that had been dragging on for over 10 years, so Portugal was going to embark on a process of transferring sovereignty, to use the technical term, or decolonisation as it's commonly known.

The countries that emerged from decolonisation were considered to be too dependent on Soviet aid. You won't remember, because you're too young, and neither will your colleagues, but all the Portuguese and international analysts, with their usual expertise, categorically asserted that those countries were under the Soviet wing. Some years previously, when Portuguese diplomacy during the dictatorship claimed that Portugal was in Africa to prevent Communism from gaining a foothold — an argument used by the dictatorship at the time — the British themselves had stated that the Portuguese used to say that but that they

(the British) obviously knew that, even if the Soviet Union did gain a foothold in Africa, it couldn't sustain an effective presence. But, in the end, it's irrelevant. The British themselves already had their own ideas, speaking as a country with some experience in Africa. And the documents are in the public domain.

When we applied for accession, the assumption in the programme was that the Portuguese-speaking African countries that had emerged from the decolonisation process were going to apply to join the Lomé Convention. It's a prediction that I liked to stress very much, and I'm intellectually and politically very proud to have done so because, when Portugal actually did accede to the European Community in 1986, [...] all the Portuguese-speaking African countries were members of the Lomé Convention. In other words, from that point of view, African diplomacy was quicker than the Portuguese negotiations for accession to the EEC. I want to be very clear: the only country that wasn't a formal member was Angola, although its negotiations had already been concluded and Angola was also to join the Lomé Convention in 1986.

So I'd just like to say that the final assumption that I've set out here as regards the application for accession was very strong at the time, because Portugal wanted to maintain its economic and trade links — the ones that were possible, let's say, in view of the [African countries'] independence and their appetite for free trade, which is what we've really been talking about for some time — we wanted to maintain those links, so we couldn't remain outside international conventions. Then the Lomé Convention was presented, i.e. before the major globalisation process, when that phenomenon wasn't what it was to become later, and it appeared to be one of the best solutions at the time for the 'North-South dialogue', something that's not discussed very much nowadays.

And I am aware that it's no coincidence that Portugal hosts a Council of Europe North-South Centre in Lisbon, but it has a lot to do with the view that there should be closer links between European and African countries in terms of thinking on trade and international solidarity. As you know, the Lomé Convention wasn't just a platform for trade, it had substantial funds for the industrial development of those countries and for investment via the European Development Fund (EDF) in Brussels. So our application for accession, or, rather, the speed of our application for accession, because that's what we're talking about, I repeat: it was a Government that came into office in July, approved its programme in August, announced in September that it was going to apply for full membership in Brussels at the appropriate time, began the respective diplomatic steps in December 1976, scheduled two Prime Minister's visits with a delegation to the capitals of the nine Member States to say that it was going to apply for full membership — the visits took place in February and early March 1977 — and applied for accession, knowing that the answer would be positive, on 28 March 1977, so it can't be denied that it was a rapid process and, perhaps, one of the most effective political and diplomatic operations in which Portugal has been involved.