

The evolution of a European political community: Values and identity frontiers

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Political integration and the creation of a European political community beyond apparently unmodifiable frontiers, has been part of the European project since its inception, helping to transform former walls in cooperation bridges. Hence, elucidating which kind of bond is required among very diverse European citizens to keep their political community together is an essential element for the consolidation of the European integration process.

European identity has been redefined with each successive enlargement, since each of them implies a subsequent change of frontiers, not only geopolitical frontiers, but also mental ones, deeply related to different set of norms and political cultures.

In this sense, the fifth enlargement of the EU implied the deepest challenge to the sustainability and deepening of a European political community. The 1st of May 2004, for the first time in the history of the “old continent”, most European countries apparently became, following their democratic will, equal members of the same political and economic entity. The politicised hope of the “Return to Europe” after the democratic revolutions of 1989 found then a materialisation through the accession to the European Union. For the new member states in Central and Eastern Europe, this was many times seen as a sort of revenge on history, the history inherited from “Yalta” and its division of the European continent after the Second World War. The notion of “Europe” was again claimed to be integrant part of these countries’ cultural identity and of their attachment to so-called “Western values”. And it is precisely that very notion of Europe which becomes the objective of these countries after the fall of communism, constituting the main horizon of their democratic transitions in the eyes of the new political elites. For the old EU member states, Eastward enlargement is a geopolitical ambition (said to extend stability and democracy in the continent) but, above all, a major challenge for European integration, its political cohesion and its future frontiers.

Through the enlargement process, the CEECs brought with them the notion of Europe as a continuous political project substituting the idea of Europe as a space of civilisation threatened by totalitarianism. This increased the confusion of feelings experienced by the older member states, which were used to think of the Eastern side of the continent as the automat reverse of their values and achievements and as a comparative entity to emphasise the success stories that European integration would have brought.

In such a context of change of paradigms, our main questions could be: Are we talking about the same Union? Or does the nature of the Union totally changes in the post-Cold war period when its geopolitical meaning is suddenly cancelled? In this sense, it is curious to observe how the persons in charge of bringing about the enlargement process at key institutions in this process, like the European Commission want to give the impression that it is obviously the same Union going through a new enlargement process and walking towards the initial objectives of the Union, as they repeatedly claim: to achieve peace, stability and prosperity in the continent. The way the enlargement process was organised with a focus on accession conditions to be fulfilled and a negotiations calendar emphasises the impression of “just a new step” in a future-oriented institution leaning towards an ignored culmination point. Setting the phases of a “natural” evolution accentuates the perception of “going on as we should and need to do”. But is it so sure that it is just the same Union in a new evolutionary phase? There are many factors that indicate that Eastward enlargement is an unprecedented one. First of all, we could allude to the so-called “revolution of the new member states number”. Unlike former

enlargements, which implied the accession of one or two new member states, Eastward enlargement includes ten new member states: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the islands of Malta and Cyprus, which would be complemented with Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Linked to this aspect, there is another important difference based on the fact of the very particular economic and political antecedents of the post-Soviet states.

In addition, Eastward enlargement explicitly poses the question on the final frontiers of European integration as no other enlargement has done before. But, above all, one fundamental difference with past enlargements (and this will constitute the focus of this core chapter) lies in the need of the approval of the European public opinion, which has never been so influential to change the direction of an integration process which was changing different societies' lives without fully this entailing their involvement. In fact, an economic Union can work and rely on "believing" elites, but a growingly political Union can only survive with the support of the citizens.

Is this, therefore, a different Union? A Constitutional process could have indicated the success of the vision of the EU as a political project but the weight of public opinion in the dismissal of the Constitutional Treaty sheds light on the nature of this probably new Union. It is not just "action" on behalf of politicians and civil servants which builds the integration process but also "reaction" and reaction comes from an unheard of actor in this scenario, an actor commonly defined as citizenship in explicit acts of direct democracy.

In sum, Eastward enlargement implies for the EU a redefinition of its *raison d'être*, its institutions and of frontiers. Enlargement poses, therefore, the question of the EU legitimacy before the peoples who compose it and entails as reformulation of the major ideas, issues and interests which shape its political identity (European solidarity, a European Constitution, European security...). These challenges transform discourses and communication documents in the main source to discern how the perception of a time of radical changes could have an influence in the definition of what a future EU should mean and entail.

The study of Eastward enlargement has largely emphasised the diplomatic and political strategies or juridical and economic aspects of the candidate countries. On the contrary, it is necessary to take into account the societies, the political and partisan cleavages and the role of public opinions. The referendums on EU accession have shown the common aspiration of the peoples of the CEECs to take part in the European integration process. However, the candidate countries are not part of a homogenous block but are characterised by a diversity which will grow even more within the EU. In opposition to NATO enlargement, which implies only the accession to a military institution, EU enlargement does not only involve the legislators and state administrations but also an interpenetration in the economies and societies of the candidate countries. For this reason, the success of enlargement would also depend on "intermediary bodies" like trade unions, the media, universities, the NGOs and other agents which participate in the constitution of a civil society.

In few words, Eastward enlargement obliges us to interrogate ourselves on the one hand, about the formation of a "European civil society" as Victor Perez Diaz did and, on the other hand, about the existence of a European public space and public opinion, as Jürgen Habermas maintained.

But there is still one phenomenon that needs to be explained and it is that of the reluctances of the EU

public opinion to enlargement, accompanied by the occasional reluctance of some elites and the citizens of the new member states. The factors to analyse such reluctances to welcome the candidate countries (stronger than ever before in the history of the European integration) could be explained by these three factors: the time division of the Eastward enlargement process, the “normative” method of this new accession and an information deficit, linked to the absence of a trans-European debate.

The fifteen years which separate the fall of the communist systems in 1989 and the access of the CEECs to the European Union in 2004 have a major consequence for the public opinions of the continent, both in West and East: the explanatory dissociation between the democratic changes of 1989 and the project of European integration. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the political cost of the fact that NATO enlargement preceded that of the EU.

In their relations with the EU, the candidate countries have known three phases which partly explain the perplexity of the CEECs’ elites and opinions in the moment of their accession to the EU.

From 1989 till 1993 there is a phase of “europhoria” after the fall of the Berlin Wall during which there is a strong European aspiration in the CEECs, a more or less authentic sympathy and a will of openness, linked to empathy, in the Western European public opinions. However, such enthusiasm is not so unanimous in the realm of European politics. The Association agreement signed with Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1991 was vague about the question of a future accession and it hid under a commercial agreement limited to establish quotas in determined sectors in which the post-Soviet countries could be competitive (textile, steel, agricultural products...). It is also the time when François Mitterrand introduces his plan of a European Confederation, which seduced Vaclav Havel in a first moment. In this sense, many political figures of the time understand that the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact must imply that the post-Soviet countries come closer to the European Union in any way. Nonetheless, Mitterrand soon declares that “the accession of the CEECs to the EU could only happen after decades and decades” even if he thinks it is wiser to integrate in this “European Confederation” a Soviet Union about to break up. It is then that the image of a France hostile to Eastward enlargement is born, perception which is brought back by many European national media and organisations after the “no” to the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, in which the fear to further enlargement (and especially to the idea of Turkey’s accession to the EU) seems to have played an influential role in French public opinion.

The second phase, from 1994 to 2000 would be characterised by impatience on behalf of the CEECs and mutual disappointments both for the candidate countries and the main negotiators at the European Commission. With the violent break-up of the ex-Yugoslavia it was soon clear that post-communism did not imply only any triumph of liberal democracy but also a return to war and extreme nationalism, constituting challenges to which the EU did not well know how to respond.

In historical terms, this is a reminder of the usual unmanageability of change and turning points. In 1799 Woltmann made a very interesting reflection on the real effect of turning points in History. He refers to the French Revolution, which he witnessed, but it could well be applied to other cases. He defines turning points, very interestingly, as a paradigmatic example of “progressive future” and says:

“The French Revolution was for the whole world a phenomenon that appeared to mock all historical wisdom, daily developing out of itself new phenomena which one knew less and less how to come to

terms with” .

The end of the Cold War retains the same sense of unmanageability of radical change in History, in which previous criteria, values and instruments seem not to work any more. Turning points are a time of re-invention but till the new self-definitions are created, events move faster than decisions, and discourses could be either the fruit or the striking cause. This was the case with the EU and the disorientated search for a solution for the Yugoslavian conflict. Thus, it is very significant to observe (we will see reflected it in several documents in the following sections) that there was a turn towards the CEECs and the promotion of their future accession since that could give the positive image of the EU as a history-changer and dream-fulfiller that the EU would forever lack in its intervention in Yugoslavia. Therefore we can say that the gruesome war in the European soil during the nineties was the dark side of the medal that had to be hidden by the golden side, represented by the project of re-unifying the East and West of Europe. To some extent, the option of an Eastward enlargement over more limited forms of association with the CEECS could have won from that need for an iconic counterbalance. And that is also why, from 2005 onwards, the European Commission highly emphasises the accession of the Balkan countries with the meaning of a pending debt for which it is not even necessary to give reasons or justifications.

In any case, from 1994 till 2000 the CEECs understand that is the time for deepening, clearly explicated by the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty and Eastward enlargement does not seem to be such an urgent priority for the EU. These countries prepare themselves then for a long and demanding march, marked by a shifting calendar which resembled a permanent waiting room. However, in the spring of 1998, with the opening of negotiations for five countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia and Estonia) the Eastward enlargement process is given a new impulse.

This third phase, which goes from the Nice Treaty of 2001 to the materialisation of Eastward enlargement in May 2004, is pervaded by a sense of pragmatism and expertise. The negotiators representing the CEECs’ governments examine with the Commission officials (under the direction of Commissioner Günter Verheugen) the thirty chapters concerning the conditions for accession. The enlargement process takes in this period (also marked by the creation of the DG Enlargement at the European Commission in 1999) a technical turn that also affects public opinion since it starts to focus on the analysis of the advantages and inconvenients and the costs and benefits of enlargement. The cost-benefit analysis that becomes overwhelming in the media and academic literature of the period, being also present at the EU institutions, which brought the attention out from the conducting thread on the ongoing communication strategy on enlargement, which dealt with the origins and objectives of the democratic changes of 1989. This generated a dissociation in the time feelings of the rhetoric communication strategy, focusing on the transitions after the end of the Cold war and the new political and social priorities, which, in the case of the enlargement policy management focused on bureaucratic procedures and on guaranteeing the future of the EU by inventing new directions and political needs. Without an explicit redefinition of the European project and without a communication strategy focusing on the political explanation of enlargement, the EU gives the impression of being imposing a “we know what’s best for you” kind of attitude. The obvious result of such mood is a low support of the citizens within the EU member states, but also, increasingly, in the candidate countries.

In the aftermath of the disappearance of the “Soviet empire” there are two available options for the EU

with regard to the post-communist states knocking on its door:

The first option consists of an inclusion in the democratic European club without an actual accession, which could come eventually after long transition periods to fulfil all the necessary adaptations. Meanwhile, the CEECs would only be tied to the EU by an association partnership.

The second option consists of promoting the same model as that used for Southern Europe in the eighties and for Northern Europe in the nineties, namely, actual accession in several steps of negotiations to become a full member of the club. This will be the successful option. This model had the advantage, in the eyes of the EU institutions, of having been partly experimented before, of not clashing with the deepening priorities of the EU in the nineties and of taking the time to decide on the evolution and the rhythm of the process. Nonetheless, it will soon be clear that, having to deal with countries which were well immersed in a totally different political and economic system will need new instruments for unprecedented challenges. Also new conditionality rules will have to be invented to manage applications and negotiations processes. In any case, the creation of a new kind of conditionality constitutes also an instrument of postponing accession whenever this is convenient for the EU, managing, at least the timetable of the process.

Gradually, the main external discourses on Eastward enlargement toward the EU old member states, go from the rhetoric of a unifying encounter of the continent to the notion of the EU enlarging itself to charitably integrate the other side of the continent, also winning in diplomatic and political terms from that move. This implies a move from the idea of reinventing democracy over the ruins of totalitarianism, along with a re-foundation of the European project (alluding to the “founding myth of the freedom of all peoples as the true fundament of the European project”, as sustained by Geremek) to the priority of exporting to Central and Eastern Europe a model of norms and institutions. Such priority, dictated by the understandable need to preserve the internal cohesion of the Union was commonly perceived by the CEECs as the oblivion of the unification priority, which should value more their possible contributions. In Geremek’s words “EU enlargement policy was perceived in the CEECs as a pure assimilation of new economic and political standards”.

In this sense, the reaction of the CEECs could be similar to that of Eastern Germany after reunification, where the feeling of annexation without valued intrinsic contributions was very strong too.

Also the terminology of the enlargement process accentuates the normative character of the enterprise: Usual terms created ad hoc by the European Commission, like “screening”, “monitoring”, “regular reports”, “adoption of the acquis”, “assessment reports”. All those terms also emphasise how political and economic performances would have a one-sided judge that one must please so that the final assimilation by the bigger entity can be completed. They also suggest a feeling of being under surveillance and of deserving to be punished with postponements if the assimilation process does not fit the conditionality rules. And that was difficult to accept from countries which were under surveillance and under a demanding patron with its own conditionality to punish or reward during long decades. This is maybe one of the main motors of public opinion discontent or reluctance in the CEECs: It is difficult to enjoy a regained sovereignty when a new conditionality is limiting the directions of your recently acquired freedom.

There are also two readings of the process:

The first and positive one comes from the modernising elites and the long durée historians who see enlargement as a necessary step of the process of modernisation of the economies and institutions of the “suburbs of Europe”, always in search for catching up with the Western world. The Polish historian Jerzy Jedlicki calls it “the eternal return of the CEECs towards Europe” . The Eastward enlargement of the EU would appear, under this optic, as the fourth version of the modernisation of the CEECs after the Habsburgian, Prussian and communist “attempts”. The main difference would be that this time, entering the EU can be seen as a “voluntary servitude”, since it is a freely consented choice to integrate in “European modernity”. In this sense, the EU acts as a structural power able to organise the structure of the political economy in the states of the Central-Eastern periphery. This passes through the diffusion of norms to the states and to the social actors, with an impact over the political systems, constituting “norms and nannies” as Ron Linden upheld when explaining the transfers and appropriations of norms in the Eastward enlargement process.

The second reading of the process privileges the vision of a juridical and economic integration over a political one and would therefore represent a danger for European integration. According to Vaclav Havel “Europe falls under the feet of technocracy, under normative rules and administrative procedures that make us forget the essential: the sense of a process of reunification”.

The explanatory and policy-making detachment between democratic change and European integration process increases the impression of a hope confiscated by experts and technocrats and transformed in intelligible for the public opinion. Thus, increasingly, “the arguments of the euro-sceptic parties of the candidate countries become very similar to those within the EU”.

The complaints, misunderstandings and reluctances of public opinion in both sides of the continent towards Eastward enlargement are also explained by the poverty of the available information and the absence of a political explanation of enlargement. The role of the media is essential from this point of view. There was not a big interest of the media in the CEECs during the nineties and that could be consider as a good sign of political stability since as it is commonly said “no news means good news”. Hence, democracy in the CEECs goes under a process of trivialisation while media attention is concentrated in the Balkans. “Ignorance is bliss” affirmed Heather Grabbe (main advisor for the DG Enlargement cabinet) regarding the perceptions on enlargement. However, it is the opposite, a deficit of information linked to a deficit of support that is confirmed by surveys and specific studies.

In addition, the low support to Eastward enlargement in old and new member states can also be explained because of the absence of a political debate on the meaning of enlargement and on the redefinition of the European project. And it is curious to observe how the lack of a debate between the intellectual and political elites of Western and Eastern Europe does not correspond to an increasing number of all sorts of exchanges and a circulation of persons between both sides of the continent. During the eighties the contacts were more limited but the positions of the great figures of intellectual dissidence had an impact in the West. Today, there are more and more contacts but very limited exchanges of ideas. It is as if after the disappearance of the common adversary -Soviet totalitarianism- both sides would not have anything to tell to each other, or as if the former exchange of ideas with the CEECs was a mere political instrument with a given caducity.

The result is that in fifteen years we have passed from a political view founded on democratic political values to a more technocratic approach which looks tied to the chosen method of enlargement and to

the duration of the process.

The year 1989 was a rare moment where the European question was placed at the centre of the political debate in each post-Soviet country, maybe a real but ephemeral Illusion of the Neutral time, a real new beginning that remained as a hope without answer or a hope with a long term reply. At that time, public opinions were largely absent of the EU accession process and the focus was put on strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the candidate countries.

Authors like Dan O'Brien and Daniel Keohane consider that referenda "inject a dose of human drama in the arid and technocratic process of European integration". The referendums on EU accession have clearly provided a victory for the European integration partisans without a possible contestation: they achieved around 90% of support for accession in Slovakia, Slovenia and Lithuania, more than three quarters in Poland and the Czech Republic and around two thirds in Estonia and Latvia .

Even if the participation was low, the "yes" to the referenda for EU accession benefited from an overwhelming consensus between all the political elites in the CEECs. Obviously, all political parties in the CEECs understood that supporting EU accession would guarantee being in the winning side, especially if they are the ones who bring it about in a moment considered like an "appointment with History".

The initial EU policies oriented towards the reduction of economic disparities in the levels of prosperity within the Union are being contrasted with a reduction of a solidarity priority towards the CEECs, as the document on the Inter-institutional Agreement and the Financial Perspective 2007-2013 shows . In the eyes of the CEECs leaders, the moderation of the solidarity policies could be partly explained by the difficulties of the European economic conjuncture, but that should not overshadow the need of making also the political disparities disappear between the two sides of the continent. The EU finds itself, also because of the defeat of the constitutional initiative, at the crossroads and the CEECs cannot understand that the historical change that their entry implies is not equated with challenging policies which at least acknowledge their existence.

The second dimension of the "principle of hope" in the CEECs regards the changing nature of the Union and the question of its new frontiers. The CEECs know that they are part of a dynamic process of enlargement and, after May 2004, see how the accession efforts are more focused in integrating Turkey and the Balkans as soon as possible than in deepening the relations with the CEECs making sure that their needs are being met and that their aspirations are now part of the common EU policies. One manifestation of such feeling lies in the fact that the DG Enlargement of the EU, since 2005, is focusing in the new wave of Enlargement towards Turkey and the Balkans and is not dealing so much with CEECs' issues. This is naturally explained by the Commission officials by saying that since they are members in their full right after May 2004, the CEECs do not need any special guidance or treatment within the EU institutions and particularly within the Commission. But, on the other hand, the CEECs are not so much full members since, for the first time in European integration history, they are experiencing transition periods which, in timing and conditions, are totally unprecedented and which are applied in very important fields such as the free movement of labour within the Union and environmental measures. The other Commission DGs apart from DG Enlargement declare that they have neither the time nor the sources to deal with the complexities of the CEECs transitions periods, which could well be considered a matter that requires an exclusive attention. The DG Enlargement,

with the justification that they are not any more candidate countries says they are not their direct competence. Hence, the political leaders of the CEECs strongly complain about the lack of exclusive attention after a “historical event” such as Eastward enlargement. They feel that the EU and, especially the Commission, do not want to be disturbed with their complex digestion while they are under pressure to assimilate more member states in a speedy sort of fashion. At the end the CEECs governments feel that nobody is actually dealing with the particular problems of their gradual accession since most Commission DGs deal with the Union as a whole and DG Enlargement is devoted to a next wave of Enlargement which is, once again, presented as a historical opportunity.

It seems as if every new generation of Europeans is forcefully being invited to answer the question of the limits of the European Union. Geographically, the fact that Turkey belongs to Europe is not so self-evident and the sole idea of sharing borders with Iran and Iraq is considered “off-putting” for many old EU member states’ public opinions. The new wave of Enlargement also poses the question of the EU-Russia relations and sees again Russia as the new probable “natural” border of EU assimilation. Such questions are related to the old issue of the “absorption capacity” firstly appeared in the Conclusions of the Presidency of the European Council of Copenhagen of 1993. In this document we can see, for the first time, a direct allusion to the need to delimitate the physical and axiological frontiers of the Union. In 1993 the Copenhagen Criteria tried to define the conditions for eventual candidates for EU accession. In 2001, the Laeken Declaration stated that the frontiers of the EU halt where democracy and Human Rights are not respected. But this is a very vague definition. Democracy and Human Rights should not better be a monopoly of Europe, but a desired characteristic of all regions of the world. Thus, the fact that they continue beyond any “European” frontier does not mean that Europe has extended its values but that other part of the world do not differ that much from those principles, which they also have the right to call theirs. Where is then the axiological frontier of the EU?

Maybe it is the notion of “community” itself, which accompanies this entity since its creation. The EU is, above all, a political and economic community, a community of laws, a community of interests but, essentially a community of values and common memories. And that could be a key notion for the new member states. They could become, above all, part of a community, finally acknowledged through the enlargement process. It is a community that constructed itself, historically, through the reconciliation of the interconnected memories of all its members, within a spirit of mutual solidarity and the aspiration of a shared identity based on a history of interactions that cannot be neglected.

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski posed the following question:

“If we would like the EU to be not just a place for money temples and the stock exchange, but also a place where material prosperity is surrounded by art and is used to help the poor, if we want freedom of speech, which can so easily be misused to propagate lies and evil, as well as being used for inspiring works -then, what is to be done?” .

This question, which can be reduced to the question “Why the European Union?” continues to be replied with the standard (but let’s say legitimate and meaningful) response “peace and prosperity”.

At the same time many voices are asking out loud whether today’s European Union is not too much an answer to the concerns of the past and too little an answer to the challenges of the future.

This very important observation will be therefore the conducting thread of the next section, devoted to

the EU Communication Strategy on Enlargement and on the reactions to it. Since the EU Communication Strategy on Enlargement has not proved to be neither efficient nor successful at the level of the EU 25 public opinion we are to pose the question “Was it again giving more answers to the concerns of the past and little answers of the fears and expectations projected into the future?” In any case, we will be able to observe how it recreates again the “making History claims” typical of Eastward Enlargement justifications.