

The repercussions of decolonisation on the European integration process

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The creation of the European Community forced the countries of Europe to bring their overseas policies into line with their European policies. At the same time, the break-up of the colonial empires and the emergence of Third-World countries on the international stage led to a complete transformation of relations between Europe and its colonies that had either already gained independence or were on their way to doing so. The countries of Europe wanted to find a way of linking their (former) colonies with the fledgling Community structures while also safeguarding their historical links with their empires.

When the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) was being drawn up in 1956–57, the negotiators debated the extent to which the colonies should be associated with the future Community. The geopolitical concept of Eurafrika, a term used since the interwar period, once again became the subject of considerable interest. The six Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) wondered how they might establish a customs union with its own Common External Tariff (CET) while still maintaining the historical preferential links between European countries and their overseas territories. France refused to open up its African markets to its partners and continued to bear single-handedly the financial cost of the development of those markets. In the midst of the war in Algeria, France sought to compensate for the weakening of political ties by strengthening economic relations between Europe and Africa. The French National Assembly made the EEC-OCT association and the Eurafrika common market into essential prerequisites for ratification of the Treaty. Apart from Belgium, which had colonies in Central Africa, France's partners feared becoming embroiled in a neo-colonial-type policy, something which was severely condemned by the United Nations. The French demand therefore gave rise to intense diplomatic discussions.

The Treaty of Rome, signed on 25 March 1957, ultimately provided for the commercial and financial association of French, Belgian, Italian and Netherlands overseas territories with the EEC for a trial period of five years. A free-trade area was established between the Six and each of the associated countries. As a result, African tropical products found new outlets in Europe, and the Six were able to sell their industrial products in Africa more easily. On the financial level, the Treaty established a European Development Fund (EDF) funded by European national contributions in order to meet the cost of economic and social infrastructure investment.

Once the five-year trial period had elapsed, the Convention on the Association of OCTs was renewed between the Six and the 18 Associated African States and Madagascar (AASM). The new convention on association, also valid for five years, was signed in Yaoundé on 20 July 1963.

From 1961 onwards, a new element was added to the mix: the United Kingdom's first application for accession to the European Common Market raised the question of the future relations between the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth countries and the EEC, especially the potential accession of English-speaking African countries to the AASM-EEC association. Once again, the European Communities' policy of cooperation needed to be adapted to the new international climate. In 1975, the first Lomé Convention established a partnership between the EEC and 46 African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.