

Give and take

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Enlargement enriches old as well as new members

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THIS report has looked at some of the ways in which the EU has changed the 12 new members. But the newcomers have also changed the EU in many ways. Here are some of them.

An expansion to 27 members would cause institutional gridlock, it was forecast. That turned out to be spin to justify streamlined voting rules contained in the Lisbon treaty. Not only is there no gridlock, but with 27 countries represented round the table there is less waffle than before.

Big deals have been concluded, notably an agreement to cut 20% off EU emissions of greenhouse gases by 2020. Fears of becoming too dependent on Russia played a big part in persuading the new entrants to sign up to the EU's climate-change deal (which also stresses energy security). They remain worried by their big neighbour to the east, and their presence has made EU debates on Russia more hardheaded.

The European Commission is recruiting a whole generation of Eurocrats from the new members who are slowly changing the place. For one thing, they speak English, not French. More fundamentally, the EU institutions were originally designed on French lines, and older officials still take the quasi-Cartesian view: I regulate, therefore I am. But many of the newcomers have already pushed through liberal reforms at home, perhaps during spells as junior ministers, which makes the best of them impatient when told that the EU is too hard to reform.

The Vatican has done well out of the latest enlargement, comments an official. It is not just Poland that brings Roman Catholic values to Brussels. Courts in Malta, an island nation of 400,000 people, do not issue divorces, and abortion is illegal there. Various forms of gay partnerships and marriage have sprung up across the EU. That would normally have prompted the European Commission to propose mutual recognition of such unions, to avoid muddle when couples move. But with Malta and Poland in

the club, it is "not worth putting it on the table at the moment", says the official.

How many more?

The new members are generally keen on further enlargement of the union. Many would like to bring next-door neighbours into the fold. Poland, for example, is a tireless advocate for Ukraine. But the going is slow now because the easier cases are already in the club. Croatia is not really ready to join, if only because of organised crime, but the EU wants to stabilise the western Balkans, so it will get in around 2010. For the same reason, everyone wants to encourage Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania to keep on the path towards membership (Albania is going to take a while). Serbia, for its part, has to choose if it wants to stay on the democratic path or head into self-imposed isolation, officials say. Depending on its choice, it could achieve formal candidate status quite quickly or be out in the cold for years.

The hardest case of all is Turkey. Its membership bid is currently in a form of suspended animation. Entry negotiations have been partly frozen to punish Turkey for its refusal to open its ports and airports to traffic from Cyprus. The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, remains publicly opposed to Turkish membership but has agreed to put high-level EU debate on the subject on hold until 2010, when a report on the future of the EU by a "group of the wise" (which was Mr Sarkozy's idea) is due to be delivered. Turkey has serious problems of its own, starting with a court case that threatens to outlaw the ruling Justice and Development (AK) party for threatening the country's secular order.

Will Turkey ever join the union? There is no shortage of strategic arguments in favour of its accession. It is a large, secular Muslim democracy. It controls the Bosphorus, as well as gas or oil pipeline routes that would allow Europe to become less dependent on Russia for its energy supplies. Such arguments mark Turkey out as important. But many Europeans clearly feel that is not the same thing as saying it should join the EU. Any enlargement of the club must be agreed on by all existing members. The most recent Eurobarometer poll on enlargement found that 69% of Germans, 54% of French and a striking 81% of Austrians were opposed to Turkish entry.

Olli Rehn, the EU's current enlargement chief, likens the EU accession process to a journey that matters as much as the destination. Europe wants Turkey to become more modern, democratic and stable because Turkey has strategic importance as "an anchor of stability and a benchmark of democracy for the wider Muslim world", he says. The best way of achieving those changes is the process of becoming an EU member. So to him, "importance and membership are inseparable."

If membership is ruled out as a destination, the journey cannot continue. But a clause in the French constitution (a sop for the anti-Turkey camp from the previous president, Jacques Chirac) obliges France to hold referendums before approving new accessions after Croatia's. Given French voters' views, the clause makes Turkish entry talks pretty pointless. Back in April Mr Sarkozy was arguing for the clause to be scrapped. After a parliamentary outcry he is now wavering.

Turkey itself, meanwhile, seems rather disillusioned. When Eurobarometer pollsters asked Turks whether membership was mainly in their interest, the EU's interest or in the mutual interest of both, the largest block of respondents (34%) thought the main beneficiary would be the EU. Perhaps surprisingly, some senior EU figures agree. "We need Turkey more than Turkey needs us," says Mr Verheugen.

Such statements may shock Europeans, but they need to hear them. They are too used to seeing enlargement as a charitable gift from a rich West to its poorer neighbours. It is hard work for both sides. But it is also an almost magical tool for stabilising a whole continent, creating new markets and letting free trade and free movement build ties of interdependence.

For these reasons and more, Europe's most recent expansion was not just a good idea. In retrospect, it will be seen as one of the EU's most significant achievements. It reunited a continent divided by Soviet oppression and brought into the European fold nations that had previously hovered on the edges of the West. If it were tried now, it would be far harder to pull off. Europeans everywhere should be glad it happened just in time.

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