

Challenges of the EU Eastern Enlargement

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In June 2014 the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe (GCE) carried out an interdisciplinary, international conference on the topic “The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union: Effects – Challenges – Visions”. It focused on the experiences and changes which the processes of “Europeanization” brought about in the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. The participants also addressed misleading expectations as well as potential consequences for future enlargement rounds.¹

Since the EU enlargement in 2004, during which the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (along with Malta and Cyprus) joined the EU followed by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, there have been significant changes in Europe in general and in particular regarding the enlargement policy, the approval for the EU, and the optimism for fast integration.² Enlargement fatigue has spread and has been compounded by the severe financial crisis in 2008, the Ukraine conflict since 2013, and the 2015 refugee crisis – not to mention the increasing threat of terrorist attacks in recent years. In late June a slight majority of British voters opted for the Brexit, hence to leave the EU. In many countries of so-called “core Europe” populist parties have emerged, which pursue nationalist policies. The idea of a supranational community and thus the principle of solidarity are increasingly being questioned by those advocating national interests. Many current debates are characterized by notions of disintegration. The idea of European integration, which was a large-scale project to overcome the division of Europe, has come to an impasse.

One important discourse regarding Europe was triggered by the reshaping of Europe after the “annus mirabilis” of 1989/1990. A radical

system transition took place in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. The Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe, which was made possible by the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Conferences of Yalta and Potsdam in 1945, was broken by the social unrest and activities of the political opposition since the 1960s. At the same time, the Soviet system collapsed and was dismantled in December 1991.

After the hesitant consent of the Allied Powers, the German Democratic Republic joined the Federal Republic of Germany on the basis of the Two-Plus-Four Treaty on 3 November 1990 and was integrated into the existing political system. The Central European region (i.e. the Baltic countries, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary and Romania) experienced the transition to democratic forms of government as a “return to Europe” and heavily drew on historical images from the interwar period. After years of “colonialization” by the Soviet Union, these countries vehemently distanced themselves from the successor state Russia and aimed to move closer to Europe in terms of mentality and values. This pertained above all to the basic and human rights, democracy and liberalism which they embraced. Western Europe had already been pursuing a course of integration since the 1980s by creating a currency unions and dismantling border controls.

The fall of the Iron Curtain led to new fields of discourse. In ideological terms, the end of history seemed to have been reached with the collapse of communism. The liberal capitalist system had presumably been victorious and remained the only paradigm. However, the transformations aiming for a democratic system were by no means linear. The nations developed differently, and authoritarian or dictatorial structures remained intact (Russia, Belarus). Even in the countries of Central

Europe, western-style constitutions and democratic rules were not implemented in linear fashion.

For many countries it was initially a matter of rediscovering and strengthening national sovereignty after decades of colonialization by the Soviet Empire. This appeared strange in Western Europe, which was increasingly turning over national sovereignty to the supranational institutions of the European Union. Different concepts of identity emerged from the dividing lines of the Cold War and the East-West dichotomy persisted in varying ways.

As part of the integration project, the European Community was formerly conceived as an open organization for new members. However, the eastern enlargement initially proceeded slowly because the incorporation of structurally weak economies was associated with enormous fears regarding subsidy payments and labor migration processes from East to West. Old, traditional stereotypes of the foreign, backward and less civilized East thus seemed to hold and persist until the late 20th century. Nevertheless, the countries of Central Europe placed applications for accession, which were approved with strict obligations to comply with regulations laid down by Brussels. Despite a hesitant attitude towards eastern enlargement the events in the Balkans in the early 1990s laid bare the fatal consequences of nationalistic disintegration.

The accession candidates were subject to strict monitoring mechanisms in order to implement the *acquis communautaire* at the national level. National referendums were held to lend legitimacy to EU accession. On 1 May 2004, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary joined the EU. Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007.

Eastern enlargement brought about a new discourse centered on differences and diversity. Buzzwords such as “core Europe”



Bilboard on European Commission's Berlaymont Headquarters, welcoming Bulgaria and Romania into the EU, January 2007. Author: Zinneke, wikimedia commons.

or “two-speed Europe” characterized such discussions, even though the terms had already been used in the 1990s. General questions were raised regarding how resilient the EU was, whether it would be expanded at will and what the impact on its governability, agricultural policy and structural funds would be. Furthermore, people questioned where the boundaries of Europe lie and whether Turkey, which had placed accession applications a long time ago, belongs to Europe. Should one pursue the deepening of integration or the widening of the EU? And what should the

relationship between the center and periphery look like?

This issue of *Euxeinos* deals with different notions of and experiences with Europe as a political, economic and cultural idea in the Black Sea region and in Poland. What characterizes the current discourse on Europe in the respective countries and regions, what debates are being carried out, what are points of conflict, for example the issue of relations with Russia?

The authors are experts on European affairs and participated in the conference in June 2014. They have written new articles for this issue of *Euxeinos*, because Europe is facing numerous new political challenges. The crisis in Ukraine in winter 2013-2014 and in particular the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in March 2014 have raised questions about relations with Russia and policies towards countries of the former Soviet Union. These questions are addressed in the article by Dirk Lehmkuhl and Maria Shagina, who also discuss the sanctions imposed on Russia.

In his article dealing with the EU-enthusiasm and simultaneous EURO-skepticism of the Poles, Rafał Riedel shows that there must be a general clarification of the visions of Europe. Is the EU a political community, an economic community, or does Europe primarily define itself by cultural values?

Roumen Avramov illustrates Bulgaria's path to the EU and reflects on the ambivalences of the EU's enlargement policy from a primarily economic perspective.

Ulrich Schmid explores countries which consider themselves as belonging to Europe, but are not members of the EU. He demonstrates the multiple levels of understandings of Europe, which have historical roots in Georgia, Moldavia and

Ukraine as well as other countries.

In reaction to current events, opinions on the significance of the Brexit vote have also been added.

To conclude, I wish to offer a quote from Tony Judt from 1992, which can be transferred to the current debate on Europe and has not lost any of its contemporary relevance at all:

“The new Europe is thus being built upon historical sands at least as shifty in nature as those on which the postwar edifice was mounted. To the extent that collective identities – whether ethnic, national, or continental – are always complex compositions of myth, memory, and political convenience, this need not surprise us. From Spain to Lithuania the transition from past to present is being recalibrated in the name of a “European” idea that is itself a historical and illusory product, with different meanings in different places. (...)

But what will not necessarily follow is anything remotely resembling continental political homogeneity and supranational stability – note the pertinent counterexample of the last years of the Habsburg Monarchy, where economic modernization, a common market, and the free movement of peoples was accompanied by a steady increase in mutual suspicion and regional and ethnic particularism.”³

ENDNOTES

1 For a conference report by Christoph Laug see <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-5588> [17 August 2016]

2 See the thematic dossier on the EU's neighborhood policy in *Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte* 4(2016).

3 Judt, Tony: The Past is another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe. In: The Politics of retribution in Europe. World War II and its Aftermath. Ed. By Istvan Deak, Jan T. Gross, Tony Judt. Princeton 2000, 293-323, here 317. The text was first published in 1992.