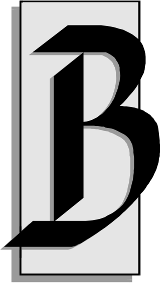

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BINGING ON EXPANSION: LESSONS FROM THE ENLARGEMENTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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In a time of grandiose plans that are unlikely to ever come to pass (such as the U.S. plan for the democratic transformation of the Middle East), the recent enlargement of the European Union—bringing in ten new members—represented exactly the opposite phenomenon. Far from a grandiose plan, enlargement was never seriously considered or debated by the peoples of Europe—despite the rhetoric of politicians, including EU Commission President Romano Prodi, to the contrary. Rather, enlargement was regarded as something that had to be done, willy-nilly, because the various candidates could not be left out of the Union for reasons both internal and external to the EU. Previous enlargements, while perhaps not seen as part of a grand design either, were more popular; enthusiasm for enlargement seems to have declined slowly but continuously.

The notion that the EU is an economic giant and a political dwarf is so common that it has become a platitude, but a resilient one. Now, with this latest enlargement, the political dwarf has gained in stature; relatively more than the economic giant since the newcomers are not as rich as the member states that they have joined. But has the political dwarf grown obese rather than strong? Has Europe been binging rather than nourishing itself? Psychologists say that binging often comes from a lack of purpose in one's life. So, does Europe lack purpose?

Another famous saying, this one originating from Henry Kissinger, is that Europe is a regional power (while the United States is a global one). Indeed, in a world of global challenges, it often seems that Europe lacks a global role. But has Europe even acted as a regional power by expanding from the six founding countries in 1957 to the current twenty-five? If it has, one might say the Union has done so in the same way as Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* wrote prose: unknowingly.

A major instrument of regional policy has been the array of association agreements with neighboring countries. Several such agreements were conceived from the start as intermediate steps before entry and in most cases have played a useful role. Others were devised to create prospects of economic, political and security cooperation as an alternative to membership and have been only partially successful.

Despite those modest intentions, the successive stages of European Union expansion have provided an outstanding contribution to the broadening of the Western area of stability,

democracy and free trade—in a way, of the West itself. Take the three Mediterranean countries, whose accession consolidated democracy on the "Southern flank" of NATO (Portugal, Spain, and Greece); or the four "neutral" countries which, without formally renouncing their status, have *de facto* become part of the shared security community (Ireland, Austria, Sweden and Finland); or, now, the seven countries formerly belonging to the Soviet system (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia)—eight in fact if you include what was once known as the GDR, which entered the European Union via German reunification.

Aside from the collapse of the Soviet system, which instead happened suddenly and swiftly, history will one day see this gradual and highly technical extension of the integration process to almost the entire European continent as the most important geopolitical development since the end of World War II. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union was influenced more than is perceived in the United States by the economic and political success of the Western European entity.

Which raises another question: has the Union received adequate recognition for such an "outstanding contribution" to global stability? Here I would tend to say no—and I would suggest that the virtual absence of ambitious or consistent blueprints for carrying out the enlargement of the Union has contributed to the lack of recognition of the EU's achievements. The absence of a grand design means that EU gets fewer benefits from enlargement at equal cost. This is all the more true for the current enlargement to twenty-five than it has been for any of the previous ones.

Moreover, the enlargement process has not come to a final conclusion; indeed, it remains quite open-ended. Some negotiations for entry in 2007 are well advanced, such as those with Bulgaria and Rumania. Others will start soon, such as those with Croatia. Turkey is, of course, at the forefront of everyone's thinking; the European Council will need to decide in December 2004 whether to start negotiations for Turkey's accession. A few additional applications for membership lie off to the side, including one from Morocco. Moreover, there is now the so-called "European Neighborhood Policy," which addresses a number of states formerly belonging to the USSR, including Russia itself, that have, at least for the time being, no prospects for entry.

In light of this crowded and apparently endless agenda, some lessons for the future could usefully be drawn from the remarkable but nonetheless unsatisfactory experience of the past. An appraisal of previous enlargements must be carried out soon, immediately after this current critical phase in which the Union will undergo the most dramatic transformation since the beginning of its common institutions. In a few months, a new European Parliament and a new European Commission will be sworn in and become operational. After initial meetings that have to a large extent been inaugural and celebratory, the day-to-day functioning of the various Councils with twenty-five members, including the summit meeting of the heads of government, will be tested. All this without knowing, at the time of this writing, whether the institutional overhaul brought about by the "Constitutional Treaty" will be approved at the Dublin Summit in June and, even if it is, whether the approved text will be strong enough to allow the new expanded institutions to work effectively or so weak that it will encourage a proliferation of *directoires*, multi-speed Europes, *ad hoc* groups, and the like.

The first part of the post-enlargement appraisal should be related exactly to that: the institutional set-up. That set-up has been the result of a painful, gradual process—like enlargement, and indeed parallel to it. One might note, in passing, that the institutional configuration of the Union does not conform to any grand design either. Nobody anticipated the present hybrid intergovernmental and federal arrangements at the outset, not even Jean Monnet (whose great legacy to European integration is less a blueprint than a method.) The current set-up has instead been the outcome of a continuous tug-of-war between intergovernmentalists and federalists, some of the former against the very idea of a more united Europe. Some think that a United Europe is a mythical beast. Others argue that despite all its shortcomings, Europe can, precisely like the centaur of myth, walk like a horse and think like a man, offering the preeminent example of a post-modern (to borrow British scholar-diplomat Robert Cooper's formulation) combination of semi-sovereign states and supranational institutions. This innovative combination has, despite its superficial ugliness, succeeded at fostering development and preventing war among its member countries.

Nonetheless, the institutional setup of the EU remains highly unsatisfactory. The European Commission has over the various enlargements developed considerable skill in establishing criteria to be met by the candidates linked mainly to their domestic economic and political performances. But a lesson should be learned from the present case in which not only were ten new members allowed in before the constitutional treaty was approved, but at least one of the candidates (Poland) was able to contribute to the failure of the Intergovernmental Conference convened to adopt the constitution. The Union should perhaps consider introducing some preconditions for its own institutional development before further enlargements can take place, especially now that a long, complicated, and uncertain process of ratification by twenty-five states will start if the constitutional treaty is approved. Obstacles to the rapid and smooth completion of the ratification process could, for instance, be considered obstacles to any progress related to further enlargement.

The second lesson should be that future enlargements should derive from conscious policy choices and debates rather than just happening. At this stage, applications and negotiations cannot be dealt with independently of a broad strategy comprising external relations and internal functioning. A sound and consistent plan should be worked out to define such a strategy before taking further steps on the long agenda of future admissions.

A third lesson concerns the issue of recognition for the European Union's achievements. I am not advocating a Nobel Peace Prize for the EU, but it should be acknowledged that admitting new countries, some of which are of significant geo-strategic importance, has been in the interest of a complex of powers that goes beyond the Union itself. The United States, in first instance, has been consistent and, occasionally strongly explicit, in stating its own interest in past, present and future enlargements. This applies particularly to the Bush administration whose statements in this respect have run in tandem to other statements, and acts for that matter, that have been perceived by many Europeans as divisive within the EU. The consistency between enlargement and reinforcement, between widening and deepening, as it is often known, should not be foreign to the attitudes and policies on the other side of the Atlantic.