



# **Old Members and New Partners**

## **Expectations, Political Realities and Perceptions**

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**Kai-Olaf Lang**

Research Fellow

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Berlin/Germany

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The 2004 and 2007 enlargements were a strategic endeavor, by which the European Union tried to stabilize and change countries in its direct neighborhood. In contrast to other forms of cooperation with closer or more distant partners, the EU had chosen an especially efficient strategy to exert full “transformative power”: The Union offered its Eastern and South Eastern neighbors to become a part of itself. So, it was clear that this step would have major implications not only for the countries to be incorporated (which was the desired intention), but also for the incorporating body, i.e. the EU. Given the confusion about the internal reforms, which were supposed to assure the Union’s capability to act after the accession of a quite big number of countries, uncertainties about the possible ramifications of enlargement for the functioning of the Union and for the old member states had been significant. Although obviously there was neither a structural blockage of the decision making process nor broader policy congestion, there is no doubt that the presence of ten new member states from the Eastern part of the continent have modified the EU, the way it functions, the practice of the political process or policy outcomes in particular areas.

This paper does not intend to do a comprehensive valuation of enlargement impacts for the EU, the old member states and the accession countries of 2004 and 2007. What it aims at, is to provide a brief assessment of

- presumptions and premises in old and new member states regarding their role in the enlarged European Union,
- the political practice and the main elements of new member states’ behavior in European politics after enlargement,
- what image new member states have “created” after six or three years in the Union, i.e. how they are perceived by their partners,
- changes that have taken place in the political behavior or the “European habitus” of the new member states and finally

- what this means for the traditional distinction between old member states from Western, Northern, Southern and Central Europe on the one hand, and new member states from Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe on the other hand.

### **1.) Mismatch of Mutual Expectations?**

Even during the pre-accession period both, old and future member states of the EU had certain presumptions about how the respective group should behave.

The *old member states* hoped to gain loyal partners, who after having joined would share not only the basic values of European integration but also take part in advancing the main political objectives pursued by and in the EU before enlargement. Of course, just like the accession countries the old members are a quite incongruous cluster rather than a unified group. So ideas about what loyalty means in specific situations or issue areas differed widely. But the overall shared expectation was to see the future members as being interested in improving the Union's internal and external capability to act. Especially in those countries which had been actively struggling for the "Eastern enlargement", the presumption of getting loyal partners went along with the expectation of thankfulness: After the first more intensive controversies with future or new member states in countries like Germany a feeling of disappointment arose, deeming the new members as ungrateful and not appreciating Germany's engagement in the enlargement process. A further element of old member states' expectations has been the wish that new members should play some "role" in the European Union. On the one hand, this is positive since it shows the will of the established members to see the acceding countries as active policy shapers rather than passive policy takers. However, as compared to previous enlargements expecting future members to play or define a specific role was something new and reflects a sort of moral appeal on the part of the old members: They tried to oblige their new partners to "comply with their duties" as full-fledged members.

As far as the *new member states* are concerned, they also entered the Union with clear expectations. Firstly, they hoped to join an organization which is based on inclusiveness, i.e. by membership they would be automatically part of all major decisions and partners would not pursue their interests to the detriment of other member states. Basically, like the old members also the entrants reckoned upon loyalty by their partners. Secondly, encouraged by the discourse which wanted to see them as active participants of the integration process new member states assumed that they would be treated in terms of cooperative and equal partnership – not only in a formal or legal way, but also in political categories. Finally, there was a pronounced need for empathy. New members from Central and South Eastern Europe wanted their partners in the EU to recognize their experience and to better understand the background and reasons for their political behavior.

These profiles of expectations seem quite obvious and could have coexisted smoothly, but in practice they caused considerable tensions. Hence, much of the squabbling between old and new members could be seen as a crises of mutual expectations.

## **2.) Political Realities**

Of course, the mismatch of expectations was not a mere incongruence of discourses. It rested on differences of interests, varying strategies and structural problems. So, political practice and political realities invigorated the disagreements which were engrained in the profiles of the respective expectations. As a result, specific perceptions about the role of the new member states emerged in the old member countries. Which factors have shaped these perceptions? With some simplification, the ideas about and perceptions of the new member states are a result of three overlapping periods which were marked by specific attitudes of new member states and by particular issues which were relevant during the given stage.

The first period was in fact the late pre-accession phase. In this time the image of the future members as obstinate or even particularistic actors emerged. This image was due to several determinants. An inflexible stance of some of the accession countries concerning some of the contentious issues in the final stage of accession negotiations was one element. An other one was the siding of virtually all Central and South East European EU-hopefuls with the Bush-administration in the context of the Iraq war of 2003. Finally, the staunch resistance of Poland against the introduction of the “double majority” as part of the institutional overhaul of the EU caused fears of new member states as a possible brakes for European integration.

Certainly, such doubts did not emerge everywhere, and it was particularly a group of old, continental European members, where such suspicions arose. It is important to stress that this first phase, the period of a determined pursuit of national interests as anticipated members, had a formative impact on the way new member states have been perceived.

The second period started with the accession of eight Central European countries in May 2004. During this phase a more positive picture emerged and new members distinguished themselves not only as possible or real troublemakers but also as active participants and “owners” of certain issues and policies. It was in this period, when the engagement of new member states for the Eastern Dimension of the EU’s neighborhood policy materialized. Particularly the role of Poland and Lithuania during the Orange Revolution showed that new member states were able to deliver profitable contributions to the EU policies, in this case in the field of external relations. Energy started to become an issue area where some of the new member states acted as source of inspiration and an engine for further “deepening” of European integration. In other fields, new member states took part in various EU initiatives, with the growing involvement in the field of ESDP being one of the surprises, since some of the Central European countries had originally voiced skepticism about the ESDP as a project supposedly undermining transatlantic relations. Also, during the decisive talks on the new EU budget for 2007-2013 (in late 2005), new member states though defending their interests did not obstruct negotiations. Moreover, after the failure of the Constitutional Treaty (TCE) due to negative referenda in France and the Netherlands in spite of the opposing attitude of the Czech president or the then Polish government, some of the new member states were willing to keep the process of institutional reform running. Estonia and Latvia for example continued with the ratification after the French and Dutch vote.

In the third period, since 2006/2007 however new member states and in a broader sense EU enlargement again appeared as rather problematic and ambiguous. In this stage we observe the rise of “populist” parties in many countries, which is seen as a sign of internal polarization and fragmentation. The accession of Romania and Bulgaria sparked not only a discussion about the timing of their entrance but also about administrative capacities and deficiencies like corruption in new member states. Difficulties in the relaunch of the institutional reform process caused by Poland and the Czech Republic or the vetoes by Poland and Lithuania against opening EU talks with Russia on a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement brought back early fears that new member states might cause stagnation in major political projects. Imbalances of state budgets and Latvia, Hungary and Romania seeking IMF and EU emergency aid to avert a financial collapse offset the success stories of economic

reform and transformation in the Eastern part of Europe. Generally, the big achievement during this period – like progress in real economic convergence, Eurozone membership of Slovenia and Slovakia or the enlargement of the Schengen-area – were overshadowed by more sobering developments. Even the “return” of Poland to Europe’s political mainstream after the parliamentary elections in 2007 has had mixed effects. Certainly Poland has become a more proactive player, coming closer to Germany and France, and effectively initiating the Eastern Partnership (together with Sweden), but Warsaw has also improved its blocking power, relying not so much on vetoes, but on interest coalitions, e.g. with new members concerning European climate policy.

What came out of this, is an impression in many of the old member states that enlargement has not only had implications, but has also lead to complications in European integration.

### **3.) How New Members are Perceived: Awkward Partners or Active Friends?**

The political behavior of new member states, “thematic cycles” and the relevance of certain issues as well as clashes of interests have shaped the perceptions of new member states in the old EU. These perceptions concern role profiles, policy preferences and the framework determinants of European affairs in the respective countries. Irrespective of their appropriateness, they tend to shape the way old member states interact with their new partners.

In the last six years, i.e. since the enlargement of 2004, especially the following patterns or ideas about new member states have emanated.

- The new member states as “solidaristic egoists”. This assessment results from a propensity to consistently fight for national interests, including tools of the last resort like the threat to veto decisions. Obviously, the egoistic element of this ascription is rather incorrect, since empirical research has shown that new member countries do not belong to the most adamant EU states. At the same time, for most new members the concept of solidarity is one of the basic values of European integration. According to them the principle of solidarity should find practical applications in the political reality of the EU – in energy matters, in foreign affairs or in the EU budget.

- New member states are anxious to defend national sovereignty, since after (re-)gaining unlimited sovereignty in 1989 they are not ready to transfer national competencies to Brussels. Though this is a proper description for ideological strands which are highly relevant in some countries, it is not a general or overall tendency, since most of the former Soviet block countries as EU members are interested in a strongly interwoven as well as solidarity based integration process (see below).
- New member states are intrinsically pro-American and have problematic relations with Russia. This perception is increasingly watered down. Since the Iraq war there has been a permanent differentiation among new member states as to cooperation with the US and relations with Russia. So, it has been rather a divide between some staunch Atlanticist and pro-US member states from the old *and* the new EU than a West – East division within the EU, which marked the political reality. Also with regard to Russia, the camp of “Russia skeptics” among new member states has followed a different line than the group of pragmatists, who can also be found in Central and Eastern Europe.
- There is a value gap between old and new member states. Indeed, there seems to be some evidence that societies in Western Europe and post-transformation Central and South Eastern Europe are based on differing values, or, to be more precise, that certain values are shared more or less widely by societies. Again with considerable simplification, it could be argued that it is rather the normative scaffolding than differing approaches to security which constitute a difference between old and new Europe.
- New member states are fragile in terms of their domestic political scenery. Indeed, there have been signs of substantial political polarization and fundamental political shifts after elections. Political parties have come and gone in very short periods, new simplifying and aggressive political groups and leaders have succeeded and the idea of politics built on consensus is not very advanced. This perception, although often overrated, includes some truth, as a number of peculiarities of political culture and electoral behavior do differ from that of most established democracies in Western Europe (high volatility, predilection for confrontative politics, disenchantment with politics, low trust in political and public institutions). Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that in some cases new member states show an astonishingly high stability and institutionalization of party systems or a considerable continuity in policy outcomes also after change on the domestic political scenery.

- New member states are undermining the European social model. This is certainly a controversial perception, and one which is not shared by a majority of public or national actors in the old EU. However, on the level of public debate in some old member states the process of Eastern enlargement was seen primarily as an emanation of globalization, which poses essential threats to the welfare state.

#### **4.) Change and Recent Developments**

For a considerable part of the public and of the political classes in the old member states, for a long time the new EU members had features of awkward partners rather than active friends. However, slowly a more sophisticated view is replacing this perception. Particularly the following trends will strengthen this development.

- As opposed to the conventional conviction in the old EU, NMS are basically pro-integrationist and protagonists of political, institutional and socio-economic cohesion. They are opposed to any form of multi-speed Europe, since they are afraid that they might end up in an outer zone of integration, i.e. on a new periphery of a more loosely woven EU. Also with regard to their basic interests of maintaining and improving the concept of a solidaristic European integration they are committed to avoid a shallow and fragmented architecture of the European Union.
- Also, NMS are supporters of the community method in European politics. For them, as mostly smaller and medium-sized countries, the institutions representing the community principle, like the Commission or the European Parliament are natural allies. They are rather skeptical about the emergence of non-transparent or exclusive groups or informal arrangements among the EU heavy weights, who sometimes tend to reinterpret rules or risk conflicts with the community institutions.
- Significant change has occurred when it comes to the way NMS see the EU in terms of their security. Foreign policies of many NMS are heavily securitized. In their traditional assessment it was the alliance with the US and NATO, which were responsible for tackling security risks, whereas the EU was treated as an instrument for improving standards of living and closing the civilizational gap with the West. However, threat perceptions have changed. While traditional hard security risks did not vanish, new, soft threats emerged. For most NMS they are not so much linked to international terrorism or

other global dangers, but to Russia and developments in the post-Soviet space. Therefore, questions like energy security or trade conflicts have a new relevance. At the same time, NMS have increasingly come to the conclusion that it is the EU rather than the US, which is able to provide for efficient security mechanisms in this policy fields. A more recent tendency is the active endorsement of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (Poland has launched a common initiative with France and Germany in the framework of the so called Weimar Triangle). After a more prosaic and modest approach to Central and Eastern Europe by the Obama administration, some NMS seem to treat the EU even more than a security community – and that is why they try to be security providers in the Union's security and defense sphere.

- Finally, NMS have been game changers in key policy areas. As has been mentioned before, not only using their blocking force, but also by launching new initiatives and developing cutting-edge activities. Neighborhood policy or energy policy have been the most prominent examples. Therefore, key old member states like Germany are looking for partnerships with new member states to move policies forward or to jointly co-shape them.

### **5.) Old Europe vs. New Europe?**

Does the old vs. new member states divide still exist? Certainly, this notion will continue to exist for some time – as an analytical category and as a political identifier. However, the trends of differentiation mentioned above will contribute to a more distinguished picture. Moreover, several other developments have already begun to make this dividing line obscure and to create other criteria of diversity. Here, the growing involvement in new regional or subregional formats of cooperation might play an important role. E.g. the contacts of the Baltic States with Northern Europe (and Estonia's emphasis of its Nordic identity), or the participation of the three States and Poland in the Baltic Sea strategy have inserted these countries in a new spatial context of cooperation. A similar cross-cutting cluster of cooperation might emerge if the Danube strategy can develop substance. An other important factor is the current financial crises. Within the EU this is mainly discussed in North-South terms, with NMS for the time being not in the focus of the debates. These developments, together with an increasing individualization of NMS political and economic paths in the EU will overlap and blur the traditional old vs. new cleavage in the EU.