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Fifty years in one day

A qualified toast to enlargement

By Richard Laming

The Prague Post
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It is hard to overstate the significance of the recent enlargement of the European Union. At the stroke of a pen, 70 million Europeans suddenly gained new rights.

Czechs, Poles, Lithuanians and others now have access to the world's largest single market; they can vote for the people who make the decisions governing that market; they can petition the court that supervises the people who make the decisions. These are rights that they did not have last week. They have them now.

This is a portfolio of rights that took Western Europeans 50 years or more to develop. Overcoming the resistance of national vested interests to establishing effective European cooperation was not easy and is still not complete. Decades of debate and argument have been needed to get this far. Citizens of the 10 new member states have gained the fruits of 50 years' development in one day.

Of course, the single pen stroke that confirmed all of this was just the last of many. The negotiations necessary to permit the accession of the 10 new member states were long and complicated. In fact, more time has passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall than elapsed between the end of World War II and the Treaty of Rome. Does this show that today's politicians lack drive and imagination, or does it show how extensive are the obligations of a member state of the EU? Maybe a bit of both.

In light of all this, another conclusion can be drawn. The future will be difficult, too.

Whatever they were, the reasons the enlargement negotiations were slow and tortuous have not gone away. The politicians involved will not suddenly find the verve and spirit they have been lacking and the issues at stake are not suddenly going to get easier. In fact, it will probably be the opposite.

At midnight April 30, due to a misunderstanding with a waiter, I found myself toasting the moment of accession with a mixture of Czech beer and French champagne. Maybe that is symbolic. Of course, it didn't taste as good as either Czech beer or French champagne would have on their own. I think that is symbolic, too.

For it would be doing a disservice to Europe to think that acquisition of 10 new member states and a further 70 million citizens can pass without a fundamental rethinking of how it works. It simply cannot be business as usual. Pouring more drinks into the same glass doesn't always produce a great-tasting cocktail.

So what are the things to be done to make the latest enlargement work?

First, there is the election of the next commission. Nominations from the 10 new member states have already been made -- Pavel Telicka and his colleagues have taken up their posts in Brussels -- but there are 15 posts still to be filled. What kind of debate will there be about the future leadership of the EU? The fundamental change in the nature of the EU through which we have lived must have its effect on the political leadership needed.

Each commissioner must strike the right balance between representing the member states in Brussels and representing Brussels in the member states. Telicka will be an important voice of the European interests in the Czech Republic. A lot rests on the way he fills that role.

Second, there is the establishment of a functioning European Parliament (EP). It is a wonderful thing that 25 member states will be taking part in the elections in June, but it will make for some difficulties when the members reassemble. No other parliament in the world brings together directly elected members from so many different countries, making decisions of such importance, working in so many different languages. Czech members from all the different parties will have to work effectively within their groups: the Czech Republic's Social Democrats in the Socialist group, for example, or the Christian Democrats with their fellow Christian Democrats.

Experience from other countries shows that EP members on the fringes of their party groups are much less influential in the EP as a whole than are members in the center of their party groups. The Czech people will benefit if their EP representatives are central rather than marginal.

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And third, every Czech politician, whether based in Brussels, Prague or elsewhere, has a duty to engage publicly in European issues. One of the things in other countries that has been most harmful to public understanding of Europe has been the neglect by politicians of their duties toward the voting public. The EU is a unique and pioneering international organization, giving rights to its citizens in a way that no other organization either does now or ever has. Politicians who pretend it does not exist or does not matter undermine both the idea of Europe and, in fact, democracy itself.

There is the prospect that things will improve. If it can be agreed, the draft European constitution will help in tidying things up. There will be fewer documents to have to cross-reference. The jargon will become a bit more comprehensible. Decision-making will be simpler and more streamlined. All these are good things.

There's more to do, of course, but set against the background of the past 50 years, there is no reason to be too disappointed. The national governments will have to draw the line between what can be agreed on now and what might have to wait for another occasion. If they fail to agree on a suitable document, they will put the future of the union in jeopardy.

And then there will be some referendums on the constitution. Is this the right future for Europe? It is for the citizens of each member state to make their own decision about whether they want to be part of this shared European future. Any member state has the right to step back.

But everyone should realize that the success of the EU has been precisely because it is based on a shared experience of the past. There was war, there was oppression, now there is democracy. It is not a complete democracy, but it is going in that direction. That is the experience of the last 50 years. The past and the future of the EU are inseparable.

When the referendum comes, voters in the Czech Republic will be asked to make a judgment on 50 years in one day.

-- The writer is the director of Federal Union, the British federalist campaigning organization, and works in public affairs for commercial interests in London and Brussels. He writes here in a personal capacity.

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