



[Comment] Fifty years in one day

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - It is hard to overstate the significance of the recent enlargement of the European Union. At the stroke of a pen, seventy 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 take the decisions governing that market; they can petition the court that supervises the people who take 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 took fifty 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 ten new member states have gained the fruits of fifty 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 ten 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 the second world war 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 now of being a member state of the EU? Maybe a bit of both.

In the light of this, there is another conclusion to be drawn. The future will be difficult, too.

Whatever they were, the reasons why 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 on Friday, 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 done 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 rethink 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.

The draft European constitution gets some of the way towards tidying things up. There will be fewer documents to have to cross-reference between. 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 fifty years, there is no reason to be too disappointed. The national governments will have to draw the line between what can be agreed 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? Has the development of European integration been a positive experience? Will it

continue to be so? The citizens will make their judgement on fifty years of history in one day.

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