



# **BELGIUM'S TAKE ON EU BIG BANG ENLARGEMENT: MORE EUROPEANS MEANS MORE EUROPE**

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Belgium's take on EU big bang enlargement: More Europeans means more Europe

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## About REWEU

The project (Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU) The project is focused on the commemoration of the 2004 “big bang” EU enlargement on the occasion of its 20th anniversary in May 2024. Through the combination of local, national and international public events, collection of historical memories and narratives, studies on impacts of 2004 enlargement, costs of non-enlargement and role of women in the process, as well as exhibitions and media articles, the project contributes to wider contemporary efforts of EU memory politics. The project focuses on eight selected EU countries, four from the older EU Member States which were part of the Union’s decision-making processes leading up to the big enlargement (Belgium, Finland, Greece and Italy) and four newly acceding countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland). The project is funded by the European Union through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) under the European Remembrance strand.

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## Introduction

The year 2024 is to be marked as a historic year for the enlargement of the EU. Following the Russian war of aggression towards Ukraine, the question of the enlargement to the east certainly came back with all its strength and geopolitical salience. In June 2024 the European Council gave the green light for the start of the intergovernmental conferences with Candidate Countries Ukraine and Moldova. This event would be continuing the enlargement to the post-soviet space that started three decades ago in Copenhagen with its promises to the Central and Eastern Europe Member States to join the Union. That enlargement took place in May 2004, and for which also 2024 marks its twentieth anniversary.

The turning of this anniversary allows for a hop in the past to observe how citizens and decision makers were dealing with the forthcoming enlargement: what were the main concerns of the citizens, how would political elites respond to them, in turn how they dealt with them and what impact it had on founding or old Member States.

Two decades is an important cap, an occasion in which it's time to evaluate what has been done, to which extent the 'new member states' have integrated in the EU. Nonetheless, it is also useful, on the reverse, to see how the EU has adapted to them, and what effects has had for ten new member states and 75 million new EU citizens to join the club.

In the framework of the REWEU project, within the construction of the historical memory of new and old member states and most importantly of the European Union, this paper aims at portraying the Belgian perspective on the enlargement process. Not only leaning on the political programmes of the governments active in the 90s but also in the larger approach of this country to the enlargement, and more generally the teleological perspective Belgians have had about the European Union, since before it was called that.

The paper shortly retraces key starting points on the approach to enlargement in general, and more broadly in the framework of Belgian approach to EU integration process. It then provides an account of the different European Council meetings that shaped the decade of enlargement since Copenhagen in 1993 to Nice in 2000 and then Laeken in 2001. It focuses on the narratives that were predominant in those years, from the political spectrum to the public opinion and the general appreciation of citizens of this process.

## I. Belgium and its European approach

Between 1993 and 2004 Belgium underwent several changes, both politically and institutionally. During the process for the first time in 40 years came into power in 1999 a new government coalition of which the Christian parties have not been part of. In addition, the liberals are back at the steering wheel after three legislatures, and the greens access the power for the first time ever in the new government led by Prime Minister Verhofstad. This same government, or at least the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, will be the ones finalising the accession of the new 10 member states from Eastern and Central Europe, plus Malta and Cyprus signing the Accession Treaty in Athens April 16, 2003.

Without entering into much detail, it is worth mentioning also an underlying institutional change, already well undergoing process of devolution become more and more acute. The Lambermont Accord transferred powers over local authority, agriculture, fisheries, and foreign trade to Belgium's regions, enhancing regional autonomy. It also allowed communities and regions to oversee development cooperation, electoral expenses, and political party financing. Additionally, it provided increased fiscal powers and budget allocations for communities and regions.

Opposite to what all these elements may leave the reader wonder, the Belgian position towards the European Union and the European project more in general, has not

changed that much. An example among others, from the Werner plan on to the dawn of the European Monetary System, Belgium has never ceased to support the introduction of the common currency, the stricter coordination of economic policies as well as the alignment of social and environmental ones.

In few words, but very effectively put together, Dirk van der Maelen (Sp.a – the Flemish socialist party) describes the Belgian European doctrine in his parliament intervention during the discussion for the 2004 accession :

*The Belgian doctrine regarding Europe can be summarized in three points: first, a strong and decisive Commission, as this is in the interest of small and weak countries; second, as many qualified majority votes as possible to make progress in an increasing number of areas; and third, the little importance that we in Belgium have attached to the method of calculating majorities in the Council. <sup>1</sup>*

Thus, during the last discussion that led to the ratification of the Accession Treaty by the Chamber of Representatives we can read the standpoints, largely shared also by other inhabitants of the political arch. What also meets the eye, is that these words are pronounced in a discussion in which the enlargement is at the central issue, and it does reveal another great leitmotiv of the Belgian EU approach: the reforms of the EU towards a deeper integration are not to be looked at in silos from the enlargement process.

### Deepening and enlarging

Some would call it a dogma, others a coherent political line, however, the Belgian approach to enlargement in line with the steadiness of the Belgian European policy, can always be reconducted to the willingness to condition the enlargement to the deepening of the Union. Governments of different colours have expressed in different historical moments their preference for more Europe for Belgium, rather than less (*'Niet minder maar meer Europa'*). The approach is to always strive for more coordination, more unified approach to the common national problems, that together

become European problems. The strenuous support to the introduction of the euro as well as the completion of the European Monetary Union (EMU), the push for the coordination of social and environmental policies in order to provide the counterbalance to the monetary union are the key elements of what is called 'deepening'.

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This has brought to the several milestones in the EU history, if on the one side, the Amsterdam Treaty came late to the appointment with the Nordics and Austria. Nice was somewhat early and unprepared to the Big Bang enlargement of 2004, with a

Belgian nudge the Laeken declaration intervened to push the process that will lead to the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union.

While analysing this series of events, some of major impact to the history of the EU integration, some of lesser, it is key to understand the motivations lying behind the position and the continuity of the Belgian approach. A first important element is certainly linked to the dimension of the country and the fear of losing even more importance in favour of bigger member states. A second, and not less determinant factor, is the fundamental attachment to the values of the EU and the faith in the role of the European Commission as safeguard of the Treaty and of the EU interest.

On another level, one could see the couple enlargement-deepening not as a Belgian prerogative, but as the aspirational line that does originate in the Preamble of the European Coal and Steel Community's which enounces the Treaty as the foundation of a larger and deeper community. This will be carried over to the Treaty of Rome in which it is mentioned that the Community will aspire to a tighter unity of the peoples that compose it. Thus, it seems to be aligned with the initial objectives of the Union.

On this line of thinking, one could also conclude that insisting on the reshaping of the Union when welcoming new members has to do with keeping the finality of this institution as clear as possible, despite the adhesion of countries with a lesser strong view than the founding six. As the former Prime Minister Martens explains in one of his interventions to the Federation of Belgian Employers (FEB - VBO), 'Europe can no longer afford internal division which weakens its global standing. Therefore, 'enlarging is ineluctable, but only the deepening would allow to manage it'.<sup>ii</sup>

### Political priorities

Enlargement was overall a geopolitical priority: the Belgian decision-makers were very much in favour of broadening the geopolitical space of the EU, this should be read not just in term of the affirmation of the EU as an economic power, or the expansion of the internal market. Most of all, the speeches delivered by prominent public figures, among them the Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, Elio Di Rupo and Louis Michel, all agreed on the stability and peace outcomes that this enlargement would bring to the continent.

In the background of these speeches the Yugoslav wars were geographically and temporally never far away from the discussion.<sup>iii</sup> A promise (Copenhagen 1993), a duty and a moral obligation,<sup>iv</sup> a way to redress 40 years later the mistake of Yalta. These were the main elements that constituted the narrative of the enlargement that was delivered to the Belgian, and also non-Belgian audience by its leadership.

During the year 1996, the government, prepares a political note to be delivered to the Parliament, the scope is setting its priorities for the incoming Intergovernmental conference which will then lead to the Treaty of Amsterdam. Within this note, the government outlines its position towards the EU integration and repeats its standpoints on the difficulties of the intergovernmental methods, the need to promote security and prosperity in the Union through coordinating economic, environmental

and social policies without any veto. It also puts forward the added value of the European Commission in managing this multi-speed multi-modal Union.

The priorities for the Belgian government are thus set on the 'deepening' approach: to overall reinforce the institutional setting by strengthening the European Commission and the European Parliament. In fact, the starting position around which this political note revolves is the conviction by the Belgian government, that a Union led by the intergovernmental method cannot function with a higher number of Member States.

**The priorities for the Belgian government are thus set on the 'deepening' approach: to overall reinforce the institutional setting by strengthening the EC and EP.**

This position was also anchored in specific policies, and not just looked like an institutional reform. The theme of using the community method in justice and home affairs area is expressed as a will as well as finding new financing methods for the community. It then insists on the needs of

reforming the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the structural policies, as well as general review of the financing methods in order to accommodate the incoming new members of the club. Along the years up to 2003, these key points will not change very much, there will be a change of government in 1999, however the anchorage points of the Belgian approach to the EU will remain constant.

## II. Setting the scene

### Copenhagen – the opening act

The ground laid down in the June European Council of 1993 held in Copenhagen under the aegis of the Danish Presidency of the EU is certainly an *incontournable* in the history of the EU enlargements. The so-called Copenhagen Criteria will be the most long-lasting and impactful product of that discussion and yet today, they continue to serve

as the pillars of this policy- which by many has been identified as the most successful EU external policy. <sup>v</sup>

An element of interest is that this summit lies not just at the origin of the modern EU enlargement policy with the ground laid for the Central and Eastern Europe Countries, but it is also a checkpoint for the enlargement to the Nordics and Austria, whom negotiations had yet to start. It is no secret that the scale of harmonisation of legislation in the latter group was totally different from the CEE states, as the four had been already part of the European Economic Area, therefore the negotiations were expected to be rather expedited and consensual.

In the meantime, the Belgian government is preparing for its presidency which will take place in the second half of 1993. The task is harder than one would think, especially for a young government. Due to a soaring unemployment coupled with a very weak growth in the Union, with the looming of the EU's incapability to determine the end of the conflict that is unfolding in the former Yugoslav Republics. <sup>vi</sup> This background scenario is somewhat bleak but will partly look better at the end of the semester. The elements causing distress have not disappeared at all, but the Brussels Council and the political will expressed by the chiefs of state and government altogether with the renewed energy infused by the Maastricht Treaty entering into force, helped the twelve to leave the darker times behind.

### Bruxelles – the dawn of Maastricht

The twelve chiefs of state and government gather in Brussels in December 1993, just two weeks after the entering into force of the Maastricht Treaty. This Council also marks the end of the Belgian Presidency, held in the second semester of that same year. The context in which this presidency takes place is far from ideal as the economic recession is hitting the continent, and during the previous presidencies the Euroscepticism was looming- especially in conjunction with the referenda for the ratification of Maastricht. However, the Belgian prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene who

entered the job in 1992, is determined to implement Maastricht and the forward-looking initiatives that President Delors is thinking at the head of the European Commission for the re-launch of the European Community and its competitiveness.<sup>vii</sup>

The European Council adopted the position of the Union on the place of the applicant countries in the institutions, invites the General Affairs Council to supplement that decision by determining the threshold for qualified majority of votes within the Council in the context of finalising the enlargement negotiations. Annexed to the conclusions of the Presidency, we find the basic calculation for the numbers for the Commission members, the Council, and the Court of Justice including the Advocate General, the Court of First Instance, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Most importantly, the twelve had already assigned the Council Votes for the Member States acceding in 1995 and adding the official languages of these to the EU. As a good example of the deepening and enlarging claim, we find attached an official declaration which provides for the Intergovernmental Conference to be held in 1996 with indications to consider the questions relating the number of Commissioners, weighting of the votes of the Member States in the Council and consider any measures deemed necessary to facilitate the work of the institutions and guarantee their effective operation.<sup>viii</sup>

### Cannes – the more the merrier

With the background of the French riviera a very important gathering reunited for the first time the Fifteen members of the Union after the entry into force of the accession of the 'Nordics' and Austria. In addition, the newly associated countries from Central and Eastern Europe, preparing in turn for their enlargement, were also present. Their role was the reporting of the developments happening within the structured dialogues and within the strategy to prepare the enlargement. However, they have also exchanged on the different themes that animated this gathering.

In Cannes some deadlines for the Union are set: the negotiations for the accession of Cyprus and Malta will start six months after the conclusion of the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference. The deadline for the completion of the EMU is postponed to 1999, but still getting great support in particular from the Benelux countries. It also affirms its willingness to work on the stabilisation of the Baltic region, as well as for Slovenia to adapt its legislation in the real estate sector, so to sign the Association Agreement as soon as possible, so this latter can participate to the structured dialogue.

In preparation to the CIG a reflection group counting among its members the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the President of the European Commission, representatives of the European Parliament was set up in Messina in June 1995. The aim was to advance solutions for the revision of the treaties, but most interestingly to deal with the preparation of the Union to the future enlargement in terms of institutional reforms, following Brussels Council conclusions dealing with among the others, the number of members of the European Commission. However, it also concentrates on the main challenges for the Union in the coming years: reinforcing foreign policy and internal security to better respond to the needs in Justice and Home Affairs, raising the standards of democracy and efficiency within the union and a key theme of those years the employment and the environmental standards.

### [Madrid points at the decade ahead](#)

The European Council gathering in Madrid in mid-December 1995 has a very long list of items in the agenda and key decisions are awaited on the third phase of the EMU and the institution of Europol- the new EU agency dedicated to law enforcement.

The enlargement comes only at the end of the Council conclusions with several requests to the Commission, especially of interest is the one on the future of the

financing framework for the Union as of December 1999, including the incoming enlargement. For what concerns the advancement of the negotiations, the chiefs of state and government still wish to open them with Cyprus and Malta in the timeframe offered beforehand, namely six months after the conclusion of the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference. For the time being, the applications for accession keep coming and the Association Council meetings have already been taking place for Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria.

The Intergovernmental Conference will start in March 1996, and the Madrid gathering has put on the table the result of a reflection group led by the Spanish Secretary of State Westendorp. The Belgian press at the time did not seem too warm towards the result of this report, and on his side, Prime Minister Dehaene is satisfied with this result and was not expecting miraculous solutions. In particular, he remains content with the Franco-German position on the change of pace on Qualified Majority Voting against the traditionally difficult British positions striving for unanimity at any cost.

An important point which also reveals key element of the Belgian position is that on this summit Prime Minister Dehaene installs a connection between the EMU, the unfolding of its next phases, and the enlargement. He also warns that speeding up on the latter, could be to the detriment of the Common currency and market as to end up in a free trade area.<sup>ix</sup> At the same time, he is explaining in no unclear terms that the enlargement, though a moral obligation towards the rest of Europe, remains a lengthy and difficult journey for CEE candidate countries. It could be reduced to the flash comment: 'It took us ten minutes to decide that the CEE countries would access the union, it will take ten years for this to happen'.<sup>x</sup>

## Amsterdam and its leftovers

Signed on October 2, 1997, the Amsterdam Treaty aimed to reform EU institutions and enhance cooperation within the Union. It was a follow-up to the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and aimed to address issues that had been left unresolved, especially in terms of preparing the EU for the upcoming enlargement and to enhance its capabilities in foreign and security policy, justice, and home affairs.

The priorities for Belgium for the Amsterdam Treaty regarded the institutional reform, the strengthening of the EU in the Justice and Home Affairs Area, as well as in CFSP and for the first time the introduction of the Enhanced Cooperation Mechanism. As one can obviously expect, not all the areas of interest to Belgium witnessed groundbreaking changes towards an ever more integrated EU.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Louis Michel presents the treaty to the Senate for ratification and as a first comment salutes the treaty with a moderate satisfaction.<sup>xi</sup> He provides the members of the Senate with the major advancements, especially on pillars one and three in particular looking at the good direction (towards QMV) undertaken for the provisions around the area of Freedom Security and Justice, as well as in the area of social affairs. He shows less enthusiasm to the results reached on the institutional matters. Despite recognising the increased role granted to the European Parliament, the Court of Justice and the right of citizens addresses directly these, he knows that the Union is quite far from the integration needed before the enlargement.

In order to not let the institutional reforms slip from the table, Belgium takes the initiative to put on paper – in the form of a declaration annexed to the Treaty of Amsterdam- its view on the upcoming enlargement. Subsequently joined by France and Italy, the declaration observes that, on the basis of the results of the Intergovernmental Conference, the Treaty of Amsterdam does not meet the need for institutional reform. The three countries ‘consider that such reinforcement is an indispensable condition for the conclusion of the first accession negotiations’.<sup>xii</sup>

**Belgium remain strongly convinced that the QMV should be the rule and unanimity vote the exception, especially when looking at an enlarged Union.**

In particular, and as highlights Vice-Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo in a Speech to the College of Europe in Poland in October of 1998,<sup>xiii</sup> Belgium remain strongly convinced that the QMV should be the rule and unanimity vote the exception, especially when looking at an enlarged

Union. However, he warns that this should not interfere with the enlargement process. With the negotiations finally open, Di Rupo expresses a somewhat more mitigated position than the one offered by the Foreign Minister in front of the Senate who presented the content of the declaration almost as a *conditio sine qua non* for the opening of accession negotiations.

### Nice and the war of flags

The *Nice Summit* in December 2000 aimed to reform the European Union's institutions to prepare for the accession of new member states from Central and Eastern Europe. This summit led to the *Treaty of Nice*, which laid out changes intended to streamline EU decision-making processes.

This summit was highly contentious, with intense debates, particularly about power distribution among member states. One key issue that was debated at length and very dear to the Belgian prerogatives was the distribution of votes in the Council, Prime Minister Verhofstadt had obtained the green light from his

government to use a veto on this issue. In particular, the Belgians were not ready to let the Dutch acquiring more weight in the Council. Along with its negotiating partner, Portugal, they finally obtain to be in the same group for number of votes, along with the Dutch. However, Belgium will obtain one less vote than the Netherlands, but all Benelux votes together make up for one big Member State, proudly reported Prime Minister Verhofstadt to the Chamber of Representatives.<sup>xiv</sup> In addition, a partial agreement was reached on the number of Commissioners, pushing big Member States to give up their second College member. On giving up even one Commissioner per Member State *tout court* many doubts remained, also on the Belgian side which mostly pushed for this direction to be on the 2010s horizon.

In the end, the Treaty of Nice faced widespread criticism. Many argued that it did not go far enough to prepare the EU for enlargement or address institutional inefficiencies. However, it did formally prepare the institutions to welcome the new members. Belgium, along with several other countries, would go on to support further reforms, eventually leading to the *Treaty of Lisbon* in 2007, which aimed to rectify some of the perceived shortcomings of the Treaty of Nice.

### Laeken Council

A defining moment in the history of the 2004 enlargement, is without any doubts the end of the 2001 Belgian Presidency. In an interesting circular motion, the Belgians leading the Union in 1993 dealing with the preparations to what then became the Copenhagen moment, are back in 2001 to set the path for the new intergovernmental conference to adapt the union from a 15 members' club to a Union counting 25 Member States.

The Treaty of Amsterdam had left more than one with a sensation of incompleteness. Despite the deepening that it did put in place for what concerns the CFSP and the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, some institutional pending

issues were still in the open to which Nice did not provide an appropriate solution. At the end of a Presidency that in the second half of 2001, did not leave the Belgians idle, they decide to push their 'deepening' rock up the mountain again and define in the final report of their presidency, the roadmap for the future of Europe.

The Presidency set the tone and the guiding questions for the Convention on the Future of Europe. This latter should address some functioning problems first: the division of competencies between the EU and the Member States, as well as among the sub-national entities. This should also help understanding in which domains the EU can be the appropriate level of intervention, guided by the subsidiarity principle. Then it also opened up the debate on the legal architecture of the EU more directly: the Presidency expresses the willingness to reduce the instruments, provide clear hierarchy between the different parts of the Treaties, as well as including the Charter of Fundamental Rights at the same footing as the core values part of the treaties. Slippery slope, this led to the suggestion of a constitution for the EU, the drafting of which the Convention will be tasked for the period between 2002-2003.

This programmatic annex to the Council Conclusion of 14-15 December 2001 were indeed the fruit of a relentless bilateral work that the Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt had started in the autumn of 2000. According to his Deputy Head of Cabinet at the time, the great ambition which was inherent to the Prime Minister's character could badly match with what he expected to be the results of Nice. Thus, he took the time to relentlessly knit the consensus around his proposal of a Constitution for Europe, which although being advised against, seemed to him a quality step in line with his expectations for the Union.<sup>xv</sup>

## The final mile: ratification of enlargement by the Chamber

In 2003, the Belgian parliament, including all major parties, formally supported the EU expansion to include ten Eastern European countries. Minister Michel, in charge of foreign affairs introduced the discussion. A very strong quote from the speech *'l'élargissement est le témoignage le plus vivant de la solidarité du XXI siècle'* along with it he highlights the historical significance and strategic importance of the EU's fifth enlargement, which added ten countries, uniting a continent previously divided by war and ideology. He emphasizes that this enlargement is both a political and moral duty, rooted in the EU's core mission of spreading peace, prosperity, and democracy. Enlargement to Eastern Europe is framed as a necessary step to reunite the continent, ensuring stability and fostering democratic values.

'Enlargement is the most vibrant  
expression of solidarity in the 21st  
century'

*L'élargissement est le témoignage le plus  
vivant de la solidarité du XXI siècle'*

[L.Michel, Discours à la Chambre 03.12.2003 ]

The process, however, according to the government was carefully managed through pre-accession strategies, monitoring, and support to ensure new members meet the EU's standards. This milestone for the EU was set to promises significant benefits, according to the Foreign Minister, including economic growth, new markets, and increased stability, while also being mindful of the financial costs, set at €40.81 billion for 2004–2006.

He did however not hide that the institutional reforms will be required to accommodate the new members, particularly in the European Parliament and

Council. Ultimately, Minister Michel stressed the importance of public understanding and reassurance, portraying the enlargement as a testament to Europe's unity and solidarity in the 21st century.

Thus, the debate on EU enlargement among Belgian political parties reflected a general consensus in favour of enlargement, with differing emphases and concerns. The CD&V (Flemish Christian Democrats) and MR (Francophone Liberals) strongly supported enlargement, highlighting its role in promoting stability, democracy, and economic integration across Europe. The socialist parties shared this support but stressed the need for measures to address socioeconomic disparities between new and existing member states. The Nationalist movement - N-VA backed the initiative but raised concerns about the EU's institutional capacity to function effectively with more members, calling for reforms. The Ecolo (Greens) emphasized the importance of ensuring environmental standards in the accession process, while the Vlaams Blok opposed enlargement outright, citing fears over immigration, cultural identity, and loss of sovereignty.

Across the board, parties acknowledged the geopolitical importance of welcoming new members but debated how to mitigate potential challenges to cohesion and governance within the EU. Despite the broad support, there were also significant concerns about the EU's future direction, particularly among the Flemish socialists. Dirk Van der Maelen, the socialist party's leader in parliament, expressed these worries, stating that while they approved the expansion, they did so reluctantly. His party feared the potential impact on European integration, voicing concerns that the inclusion of countries with different policy preferences could stall further harmonization in areas like social protections and tax policies, which they saw as essential for a more cohesive and socially equitable EU.

### III. Public opinion

#### The public support to enlargement, citizens' concerns and awareness

In July 1997 the European Commission lists the first wave of candidate countries and the Eurobarometer initiates the questions on enlargement, in order to better grasp the level of understanding of EU citizens on enlargement and its consequences. The average support for the accession of countries is asked by the Eurobarometer on single countries: the support for CEE is among 30-40 % for the majority, with Hungary and Poland scoring the highest in the chart of CEE. Malta on its side scores the highest in absolute terms among the official candidates.<sup>xvi</sup> Belgium, despite jumping from a shy 26% in 1998 till touching the 40% ceiling in 2000, will remain among the 'old' Member States, the one with the lowest enthusiasm towards the enlargement.

The reasons can be reconducted to a series of elements which are both old and in line with the Belgian willingness to reform institutions and deepen the Union before enlarging, as well as to the rampant unemployment and the fear for it to raise, the cost or better the perceived cost of enlargement by citizens, as well as the image of the CEE countries. On this point, an important disclaimer that recurs in several Eurobarometer editions of those years remains that the public opinion is still very far from having a complete knowledge of what the process is: data on the 'feeling informed' showcase exactly this problematic.

#### Public Knowledge of Enlargement

It is interesting to observe that the enlargement as an EU policy, as much as for example the completion of the European Monetary Union, is however not seen at the same level by the public opinion whose knowledge of it is extremely low. When the Eurobarometer started to measure to which extent the EU citizens felt informed about the upcoming enlargement: these responded negatively in very high rates.

Little initial support and slow growth for CEE country is often linked to the lack of understanding of the process, 78% among Belgian citizens in April 2002 felt they were not properly informed on the

**7/10 citizens did not feel they had been informed properly about the enlargement process.**

enlargement process. Although this number has then gone down it remained around 70% which means that 7/10 citizens did not feel they had been informed properly over this process only one year before their parliament would ratify the accession treaty in December 2003. In addition, another point which is worth mentioning is the relatively bad perception that Belgian citizens had of the candidate countries, and in particular of CEE countries. In fact, the reports describe a public opinion which has not seen the improvement of the situations for CEE countries since the fall of the Berlin wall, except from believing they got more democratic. Belgium is a specific case in point, the level of support for enlargement has remained among the lowest in the 7 years preceding the signature of the adhesion treaty.

It is difficult to assess a fully formed public opinion on the enlargement. However,



knowing that at the end of 2002 almost 7 out of 10 Belgian citizens (67%) interviewed by Eurobarometer<sup>xvii</sup> had never been in any of the candidate countries

and had no link whatsoever with any of them, suggests that there was somewhat a gap between these populations at best. The Dutch-speaking newspaper 'De Standaard', reporting the same Eurobarometer data, in May 2004 provides a somewhat larger view on the fact that the cold feet on enlargement by the public opinion in Europe has also spread to other Member States, and that among the fifteen we can now find as many against as pro enlargement.<sup>xviii</sup>

### Costs and opportunities of the enlargement

Although the level of awareness on the enlargement process per se remained low, it is of interest to look deeper at what were the elements spurring from the enlarged union that would represent the concrete concerns of the population.

According to the Eurobarometer of those years, around half of the Belgian population expects a higher cost of the Union on the national budget.<sup>xix</sup> However, the public opinion seems to be especially apprehensive because the beneficiaries of EU funds would lose part of their incomes in favour of Member States more in need of cohesion interventions and direct support to prices in the context of the Common Agricultural Policy.

On the other side, citizens are also happy to see a further integration of the Union and are prone to encourage a deeper cooperation on Justice and Home Affairs. Moreover, the enlargement of the Union and the consequent expansion of the common market does not come as a surprise to be an interesting opportunity for Belgian companies, notably entrepreneurs were in those years a category of citizens which had warmer views on enlargement.

### Cohesion

The cost of enlargement for the Belgian citizens, was in financial terms mostly linked to the fact that some regions would fall out of the scope or from specific objectives of cohesion policy.

One example would see the region of the 'Hainaut' being part of Objective 1 of the Structural funds dedicated to the regions with delays on their economic development. The Hainaut had been placed in this category since the early nineties because of its GDP which was under the 75% GDP of the EU. Because of the end of this wave of benefits and because of the forthcoming enlargement and addition of Member States which might also enter within the same categories, Cyprus is cited as an example, the Walloon Region had to find a new way to negotiate the criteria to access these funds or to proceed towards the phasing out.<sup>xx</sup>

### Security

A specific concern for Belgian citizens in the period preceding the enlargement, especially towards the end of the 90s also lied in the Security, Justice and Home Affairs Area. In fact, following the shocking events of the 'Affaire Dutroux' which led to a nation-wide scandal on the efficiency of justice and police services. In addition, with Schengen a more widespread concern linked to the geographical position of the country, fearing to be used as a corridor. The Eurobarometer reports of that year reports that 74% of the Belgians interviewed would like to see the extra financing for enlargement go into the fighting of crime, drug and terrorism.<sup>xxi</sup>

### Unemployment and Social Policies

A very prominent concern in the whole Union, but specifically in Belgium in the whole period preceding the enlargement and along with the negotiations was the unemployment rate. In fact, what had been identified as possible elements likely to worsen unemployment in the country were the possibility of delocalisation of Belgian employers to the new Member States as well as, on the reverse, the inflow of workers.<sup>xxii</sup> Thus, a great appetite for the Union to take initiatives to uplift the current situation and prevent that the enlargement would worsen as for example half of the citizens thought that the situation would worsen in 1998.<sup>xxiii</sup>

At EU level, the Copenhagen Council, which will be remembered for its founding role in establishing the criteria which form the foundations for the enlargement process to this day, was also a key expression of the worries that EU Member States had towards the unemployment situation in the EU and on the long run the consequences on the loss of sustainable growth and competitiveness for the continent. As seen in Madrid Council's agenda and in the line of thinking of the government, the development of the following stages of the EMU should include coordination policies to safeguard the citizens from possible economic difficulties.

For what concerns the employment concerns, especially on the arrival of new workers from new member states, symbolised by the famously known image of the *Polish Plumber*, Belgium like the other Member States of the Union provided for a transitional period before opening its labour market and make use of the free movement of workers around the enlarged EU. For Belgium, this period typically lasted between two and seven years, depending on the economic conditions and the perceived impact of incoming labour.

The transitional period was designed in several phases, each with increased access for workers from new EU member states. As per EU agreements,<sup>xxiv</sup> Belgium had to review the restriction every two years and then phase out at the maximum length of period of seven years. However, exception was granted for example to workers belonging to sectors where labour shortage was present (agriculture, construction).

### [Economic opportunities and investments](#)

The trade relations between Belgium and the candidate countries had not ceased to improve since 1993. In fact, despite the most logic trade partner that was found in Poland, in a report analysing the economic impact of enlargement and the Agenda 2000 the Economic Council of Belgium observes also the impressive growth of import towards Belgium from Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia.<sup>xxv</sup>

The sectors in which these countries showed a comparative advantage were the ones where the production of goods was making greater use of labour intensive using low skilled labour and natural resources. The at the time minister of foreign affairs, development and trade Mr Louis Michel, has several times defended the opportunities that the opening of these markets for Belgium would mean in economic terms. In fact, he sees the reason in the increased political stability for partner countries, the increased opportunity for the export to these countries with an increase of 75 million citizens, the increased legal safety for commercial activities and investors thanks to the adoption of the *aquis communautaire* into the legal system of the new member states, and finally on the long run the decreasing of the competitive advantage.<sup>xxvi</sup>

#### IV. *Le compromis à la Belge*: Enlarging then reforming

Many observers rely on the stability of the Belgian European Policy approach. In fact, as many acute analysts have shown the Belgian orientation towards European politics is anchored in three key pillars: deepening before widening; ever-increasing use of the community method and reduction of the unanimity vote; and the centrality of the guidance role that the European Commission. These have structured the positioning of Belgium along the years, and especially when the time for enlargements has come, the mantra was deepening before enlarging. However stable this approach has been in steering Belgium in the EU, the reality along with the enlargements has rarely been on the same time schedule. In most of the enlargements the reforms and the intergovernmental conferences steering those, have always caught up with the negotiation process with different degrees of delay. Whether these differences were linked to the diversity of the groups of countries and their degree of alignment with the *acquis* beforehand to which enlargement, could be an interesting path to observe but is unfortunately out of the scope of this paper.

In conclusion, Belgium's stance on the 2004 EU enlargement embodies the last example of a relentless commitment to deepening integration as a prerequisite for a greater Europe, underscoring its dedication to a stronger, more unified Union. While Belgian political leadership championed enlargement as a moral and historical obligation—an opportunity to correct past

mistakes and extend stability across a once-divided continent—public opinion remained more reserved on the process in general, but often strongly influenced by the concrete consequences that the entering of new member would mean for the Union they had subscribed to. Nevertheless, the symbolic fall of the Iron Curtain, like a long-shadowed veil lifting, presented an imperative to weave these new states into the European fabric, anchoring them within the shared values and institutions of the Union.

As Belgium's mission emphasized, successful enlargement required not only structural adaptation but also a careful preservation of the EU's foundational objectives, adapting institutions while honouring the integrity of the existing member states. The challenge, then, was to prepare the Union to embrace these new Europeans without compromising the cohesion or purpose that define it.

Understanding how enlargement responded to these public sentiments, how it managed diverse expectations, and how it spurred essential reforms offers insights into shaping a future EU that embraces more, rather than fewer, Europeans. By learning from this pivotal moment, the EU can continue to build a stronger, more inclusive Europe that resonates with all its citizens.

**Belgium's stance embodies the last example of a relentless commitment to deepening integration as a prerequisite for a greater Europe, underscoring its dedication to a stronger, more unified Union.**

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