

Lyon 2006 - Background papers and conclusions

EIN Summer University and European Ideas Fair

21 - 23 September 2006

EIN POLICY ROUNDTABLE

Geographic Limits of the European Union

Background

The development of the European Union is inevitably influenced by the success or failure of neighbouring countries, and the Union has always sought close political and economic relations with them - although this does not necessarily have to result in such countries joining the EU.



In 1993, the European Council (of EU heads of government) in Copenhagen defined the operational criteria for future admission to the Union. Any European country could apply that had 'institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy, as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union'. The European Council went on to state that 'the Union's capacity to absorb new members, whilst maintaining the momentum of European integration, is also an important consideration in the general interest of both the Union and candidate countries'.

The EIN working group on the Geographic Limits of the European Union was set up earlier this year. It met for the first time in May 2006 in Brussels. Participants noted that the question of what constitutes the limits of the European Union was one that last year's 'no' votes in France and the Netherlands on the draft European constitution had made central to debate about the future of Europe. It was clear that this issue is now a serious public concern.

In the past, the situation had been more straight-forward, because enlargement had traditionally led to the strengthening of Europe - not only in terms of its economic prosperity, but also in the projection of European values. It widened the area where freedom, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights were consistently practised. However, pursuing enlargement beyond a certain point could now reduce the effectiveness of the Union's institutions and undermine its ability to underpin these very objectives.

The working group pointed out that attitudes towards the question of the geographic limits to the EU are often tied to the choice one makes about the fundamental objectives of the EU. If Europe is to be simply a large free-market area or a very loose intergovernmental arrangement, then the question of limits is of less importance. This is not the case if the choice is in favour of a deeper political union, since such a union would seem to imply a strong notion of political community, territory and thus borders.

To define borders, there is a need for objective criteria. The Copenhagen criteria could be fulfilled by many nations. The need to be a country on the continent of Europe is rather vague and in many cases the decision on that basis alone would require a subjective judgement. The WG took the view that none of the traditional criteria normally used to define the extent of Europe - geography, history, shared values - are sufficiently clear-cut to be definitive, but each has something to offer. As a result, deciding the future limits of the Union might need to be based not on abstract concepts, but on concrete, case-by-case appraisal, which focus more on the 'absorption capacity' of the Union than in the past.

Conclusions of Lyon discussion



The issue of geographical limits of the European Union was thought by the Policy Roundtable in Lyon to be crucial for the future of the Union, in terms of its internal cohesion, and to have decisive implications for its identity, its institutional functioning - in particular its ability to decide and act efficiently, and develop further - as well as for the nature of the European integration project itself and the latter's acceptance by

Europe's citizens.

Future enlargements should therefore be judged in the light of their likely impact on the EU's internal cohesion. Moreover, there seemed to be a certain 'enlargement fatigue' in member states and a feeling that priority should be given to internal consolidation. The specific Copenhagen criterion relating to 'absorption capacity' had recently gained new significance. In order to avoid misunderstanding, the Policy Roundtable considered that the term might better be replaced by the notion of 'integration capacity'.

Possible elements of what might be understood by the 'integration capacity' of the European Union were identified. They included:

- The impact of new candidates on the nature and future development of the EU integration process and on its internal cohesion;
- The impact of enlargement on the identity, identity-building and sense of common feeling of the EU as a whole;
- The impact of enlargement on the EU's ability to take decisions and act efficiently;
- The financiability and budgetary implications of enlargement;
- The impact of enlargement on external and internal security.

The Policy Roundtable took the view that, in future, the European Union should insist that candidate countries fulfill completely and without derogation the 'classical' political and economic Copenhagen criteria, before accession could enter into force. There was general agreement that there should be a comprehensive EU neighbourhood policy. It was also stressed that for business, in particular, is it very important that EU rules should be stable and predictable, and that the internal market be continuously improved as new markets are opened.