

A United Europe: Differing Levels of Attractiveness among Individual Member States (September 25, 1987)

Abstract

The Single European Act extended the authority of the European Community and enhanced its international appeal. Nonetheless, criticism grew among member states. The EC bureaucracy—so went a common lament—was unable to implement reforms that were long overdue. According to the author of this article, such overwhelming problems meant that political integration was not in sight.

Source

Twofold Europe

The reputation of the European Community changes with the position of the beholder. If we can trust the pertinent public opinion surveys, then fewer and fewer citizens of member countries approve of the EC. In contrast, in countries that do not yet belong to the Community, “Europe” is increasingly perceived as a unified whole and the third largest actor in world politics, after the United States and the Soviet Union.

Both assessments are justified. The view from the inside, especially, presents problems. The growing bureaucracy and regulatory fury of the Brussels headquarters has long been the subject of complaint. The budget dispute, which returns annually, threatens to paralyze the Community soon. A new regulation of EC financing has failed so far because the member countries cannot agree on how to reform the nonsensical common agricultural policy. Recently, there has also been a dispute over the role the Community should play in research- and technology-policy. The heads of government approved Commission President Jacques Delors’ plan to complete the Single Market by 1992. It is questionable, however, whether this schedule can be adhered to in light of economic disparities and groaning decision-making mechanisms. Europeans increasingly see “their” Community as a vehicle that never gets rolling because it constantly needs repairs.

With increasing distance from Europe, the attraction of the European Community grows. Many Third World countries, which do not want to be dependent on one of the two superpowers, look hopefully towards the “third world power, Europe.” Central or Latin American politicians continue to affirm that they view the EC not only as an important partner, but also as a model worthy of emulation. Often, the political unity (or at least agreement) that we have achieved seems nothing less than paradisiacal to people in regions where civil wars are being waged and conflicts among countries are still frequently fought out as armed struggle. Here, illusions about the Community’s ability to act politically and its economic opportunities may come into play. That this is not, however, just a false estimation formed on the basis of great distances has been shown by developments with our neighbors who are not EC members.

The Common Market, driving force and guarantor of the affluence and social welfare of Europeans, has gained an attraction whose influence extends far beyond the Europe of the Twelve. The announcement of the Delors Plan alone made the members of the European Free Trade Association (Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Austria, Switzerland, and Lichtenstein) desirous of intensifying their cooperation with the EC, with the objective, as they say, “of establishing a dynamic and homogeneous European Economic Area.” In Vienna, the question of whether Austria could and should join the European Community has even been discussed of late. And the Norwegians, who rejected EC membership in a referendum fifteen

years ago, are thinking about revisiting that decision. The aura of the Common Market does not even diffuse at the bloc boundaries. Since Gorbachev took office, the eastern Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) has made increasing efforts to establish diplomatic relations with the EC. Bilateral talks on trade treaties with Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Hungary are underway.

The dismantling of trade obstacles and customs barriers and the standardization of norms, in short, an expansion of the Single Market—this lies in the interest of consumers and producers and should be supported. But the model of an ever-expanding economic integration is not appropriate for politics. The 1950s idea that an increased meshing of Western Europe’s political economies would inevitably lead to the political unity of Western Europe as well, has turned out to be an error in judgment. After three decades in which “Europe” admitted new members three times (Great Britain, Ireland, and Denmark in 1973; Greece in 1981; and Spain and Portugal in 1986), that saying by the prince of poets seems more likely to be confirmed: that when you tread on curds, they will spread out, but not become stronger.^[1] It is pointless to seek a “guilty” party: The more members there are, the more interests enter into the decision-making process. The greater the economic gap between member states, the more varied these interests will be.

The belief that the Community of Twelve could in the foreseeable future become a political unit capable of action is an illusion. The path to common ground in security and foreign policy that has been repeatedly called for in the past months cannot lead through the Brussels undergrowth. Now, the important thing is a move forward by those governments that have understood the sign of the times. Then, the others will have to think about whether they wish to belong to a Europe that defines itself politically, or if they are satisfied with enjoying the economic advantages of a common market.

NOTES

[1] The prince of poets quoted here is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and the saying comes from his *West-östlicher Divan*: “Getretner Quark / Wird breit, nicht stark.” “Weak curds who treads / Firms not, but spreads.” Reprinted in *Poems of the West and East*, “West-Eastern Divan,” Book of Proverbs, translated by John Whaley. Bern: Peter Lang, 1998, pp. 226–27—trans.

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