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East European Entrants to EU: Diffidently Yours

With the resolution and speed of a turtle, the European Union is moving its borders eastward. If the myriad promises, speeches, treaties and signatures by European politicians are to be believed, yet another geopolitical rearrangement is about to take place in the middle of Europe: Part of what used to be the Soviet bloc will now join the European Union. This geopolitical change is commonly depicted in European newspapers as eastern Europe's victory march to a well deserved paradise. East European voters, it would seem, are not so sure.

The collapse of state socialism created a situation that is quite familiar to the states of eastern Europe from their history before state socialism: In it, formal sovereignty is combined with extreme external dependence and a set of institutional arrangements that curtail their capacities to act independently. In this regard, eastern Europe seems to manifest a tension characteristic of many post-colonial states: a combination of formal sovereignty with very high levels of substantive dependence on a small number of outside actors.

Since 1989, the newly sovereign states of eastern Europe have served two main geopolitical purposes, neither of which is rooted in their interests *per se*. They have provided an external zone of geopolitical security to western Europe, and supplied inexpensive labour and energy to some of the world's most powerful multinational corporations. Most active among the multinationals

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in eastern Europe have been those headquartered in the European Union. Economic dependence on the EU and political-military subservience to NATO have been the two main features of this arrangement. As part of the latter, virtually all states of the region have decided by now to send troops to occupied Iraq. Poland—the only mid-size country among the new NATO-members—is actually in command of an entire military district in Iraq. Thirteen years after the first parliamentary elections contested by more than one political party in what used to be the Soviet bloc, eight states on the eastern perimeter of the European Union—the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia—are to be transformed into a buffer zone and cheap labour pool that is internal to the EU. The rest of the former Soviet bloc will continue to play the role of the external buffer and labour/energy supplier. From 2004, the EU will have, thus, two buffers on its eastern perimeter: one inside, one outside.

To maintain eastern Europe's buffer-zone status and to keep wage levels down for as long as possible even after the current entrants' accession to the EU, the European Union has recently invented the formula of a "two-tiered" EU, with the second—lower—tier reserved for the new entrants. The political elites of the accession countries have accepted this second-class position without much ado. Under this arrangement, the new entrants will only be allowed to adopt the Euro with a minimum delay of five years, if at all, and the socially most ambitious aspect of the European Union's integration process, the "freedom of the movement of labour" will be conferred to the current entrants only seven years after formal accession, i.e., if everything goes by schedule, sometime in 2011. It is this subordinate relationship, and specifically the low labour costs that accrue from the restrictions on the movement of relatively highly qualified and poorly paid east European labour within the European Union, that Günter Verheugen, the EU's Commissioner responsible for "eastern enlargement", referred to in his recent speech at Waseda University in Tokyo when he insisted that "the 10 acceding countries provide one of the soundest investment climates in emerging markets."¹

¹ Günter Verheugen, "Japan will benefit from the enlarged Union," Speech delivered at the Symposium on Enlargement, Waseda University, Tokyo, September 25, 2003. SPEECH/03/431. <http://jpn.cec.eu.int/english/press-info/4-1-1-157.htm> as of September 26, 2003.

For the additional applicants currently waiting at the EU's doorstep (Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey), formal membership will come at least five years later, likely in the form of an even lower, third "tier" of rights. In sum, then, workers of the former Soviet bloc are now promised that, if all goes well, they will have been allowed to actually participate in the west European labour market 22 to 27 years—roughly one generation—after the collapse of state socialism. Considering the crucial role the rhetoric of freedom, and especially the freedom of movement, has played within the political culture of the European Union as well as the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, a one-generation delay is hardly a radiant achievement. As for eastern Europe, nobody in their right mind thought in 1989 that the EU would take an entire generation to allow east European labour flows on its territory.

Meanwhile, the EU is taking new, ever stronger measures to keep non-EU citizens out of its territory, offering a clear clue regarding just what, and whom, eastern Europe is supposed to "buffer" the territory of the European Union from. The European Union is transforming the metaphor of the "global south" into an ever more real, solidified geopolitical arrangement, supported by ever more stringent border policing, more restrictive requirements for citizenship, wider buffer zones and all the other modern techniques of corporate exclusion that can be put to use by an alliance between some of the most powerful states and big capital. The European space constructed today conforms more and more to the idea of "Fortress Europe"—a notion devised a good two decades ago as a critique of what appeared at that time as the frightful negative utopia of an insular "Europe". The fast economic and geopolitical takeover and the slow and partial inclusion of parts of the former Soviet bloc is very much part of this process.

Add to the east European former state-socialist societies two small island states in the Mediterranean, Malta and Cyprus, and you have the story from the perspective of west European high government and big capital: The European Union—a polity currently with little over six percent of the world's population commanding one-fourth to one-third of the world's gross domestic product—is about to annex some more land. The new zone comes with a population of some 75 million people—about 1.2 percent of humanity—and adds approximately one percent to the EU's share in the global GDP.

Inclusion of parts of eastern and southern Europe is a touchy political process within the EU. In addition to the widespread

“Euro-scepticism” among west Europeans in general, the accession of the ten current entrants invokes two sets of specific political difficulties. The public cultures of these wealthy former centres of colonial empires invariably portray themselves as the global vanguard of “advanced”, modern, democratic, tolerant capitalism. In this view of the world, there is little room for the “advanced” West’s east European post-state-socialist neighbours to be anything but disparaged poor relatives² treated, at best, with condescension and, at worst, with an attitude of “civilizational” dismissal.³

Then there is the thorny issue of subsidies: Even the most well-to-do economies among the entrants—Cyprus and Slovenia—are noticeably poorer than most of the EU (their GDP per inhabitant figures are 74% and 70% of the EU average);⁴ mean income levels in those two countries exceed only two EU-member states—Portugal and Greece (69% and 65%, respectively).⁵ The accession countries’ average per capita GDP hovers below half of the EU average⁶ and recent studies suggest that, even in the best of circumstances (i.e., assuming exceptionally steep, sustained growth in the east European entrants), they won’t catch up with the EU mean for another generation. It is quite widely understood in western Europe today that the new entrants will be entitled to some subsidies and infrastructural development funds from the EU’s central budget, and exaggerating the magnitude of such future entitlements is one of the simpler, most easily available tropes invoked routinely in the west European media. Needless to say, the issue of enlargement is rather unpopular among the public of the current European Union.

Much more interesting, accession is a rather complex political process among the entrants as well. To the extent that membership could indeed entail some resource transfers from Brussels to the new members, and because the political and cultural elites of these post-state-socialist societies have quite consistently presented accession to the European Union as the end of the long period of

² I owe this insightful formula to Mahua Sarkar.

³ In a recent project published as an e-book (J. Böröcz and M. Kovács, (eds.), *Empire’s New Clothes: Unveiling EU-Enlargement*, 2001, <http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~eu/Empire.pdf>), my PhD-students and I have traced the appearance of such colonial tropes in the official documents produced by the European Union in a number of different contexts.

⁴ EUROSTAT, *Towards an Enlarged European Union. Key Indicators on Member States and Candidate Countries*, Brussels, 2003. <http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/pdf/eurostatapril2003.pdf> as of September 23, 2003.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

modern European history in which the east Europeans are portrayed as less-than-equals by their powerful neighbours to the west, many observers have expected very high levels of approval for accession among the population of the new entrant states. Liberal analysts in western as well as eastern Europe have repeatedly articulated this expectation and the region's liberal-dominated, strongly pro-accession governments put the idea to political use by inviting their publics to explicitly legitimise their state's efforts in achieving membership in the European Union by democratic means. The period of March to September 2003 saw nine⁷ referenda on EU-accession in the states slated to become members of the European Union in this round.

Bringing accession to a referendum has proven to be a risky matter in the recent history of the European Union. Two governments of Norway have, for instance, completed negotiations for their state's accession to the European Union, only to be defeated in referenda both times. Switzerland's voters have resisted their government's efforts to bring them into the European Union in spite of the rather elementary fact of economic and political geography that their landlocked, small state shares borders only with the European Union. The voters of already EU-member Denmark and Sweden have recently said no to their government's efforts to enter their monetary systems into the Euro-zone. (Had it been approved, the move would have replaced the Danish and Swedish currencies with the euro, already legal tender in twelve of the fifteen EU-member states). Aware of the gross unpopularity of the issue, the otherwise quite strongly pro-EU British New Labour government has carefully avoided broaching the question of the UK's possible entry into the monetary union of the Euro.

There is, however, something important in common among all of those cases; something that sets them apart from the accession states of eastern and southern Europe. Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland and the UK are all very wealthy, powerful economies. They occupy the first, third, tenth, eleventh and thirteenth places, respectively, in terms of their Human Development Index scores among the world's 175 countries included in the United Nation

⁷ There have been only nine referenda because the tenth accession state, Cyprus—a state with a *de facto* military standoff between the Greek and Turkish communities supported strongly by (EU-member) Greece and (EU-membership applicant) Turkey—was in no shape to hold a referendum, so the political elites on the two sides took care of the legal work for accession through a political compromise.

Development Program's most recent handbook.⁸ Their population's rejection of membership in the European Union or adopting its currency can be, hence, seen as a strategic decision motivated largely by their economies' relative economic strength and their publics' aversion to the idea of subsidising the less well-to-do members of the European Union, let alone the new entrants. The main message of these "no" votes is that the wealthy refuse to take responsibility for the poor relatives.

The societies of eastern Europe and the two Mediterranean island states occupy distinctly different global positions. Currently they rank between 25th (Cyprus) and 50th (Latvia) in the world in terms of their Human Development Index scores.⁹ It is in this context that the accession referenda took place. The questions posed to the voters in the referenda (variants on the basic theme of "Do you agree that [your country] should become a member of the European Union?") carries, hence, a much more complicated and ambiguous set of meanings. The following two alternatives outline some of the most important such meanings:

- YES: "Given that EU-based multinationals have already acquired control over most property and market shares in [your country], and that much of [your state's] substantive sovereignty is already lost to the EU and NATO, do you agree that [your state] should seek to gain a modicum of control over its own affairs, and perhaps some say in the matter of the future of the rest of the world, at the cost of sacrificing some of your formal sovereignty by partaking in the large-scale economic and political might of the European Union, even though its say will always be insignificant?" or,
- NO: "Do you feel it is more important to voice your protest against the geopolitical status quo tilted in favour of the EU even at the cost of endangering [your country's] chances to have access to the subsidies and development funds only offered to member states?"

In all nine cases from Malta to Latvia, voter participation rates exceeded the constitutional thresholds, and the valid votes returned a majority of "yes"-es. As a result, the referenda are legally binding and accession will proceed as planned.

⁸ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003*, New York: United Nations Development Program and Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 237-240.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Yet, the pro-EU east European governments are hardly celebrating. The referendum figures have sent a subtler message to them: Something else is happening, beyond the obvious. Table 1 lists the relevant information by referendum in chronological order.

Table 1
Results of EU Accession Referenda; Nine States Slated to Join the EU in May 2004

state	date	net participation rate ¹⁰	% "yes" ¹¹	strength of mandate ¹²
Malta ¹³	March 8, 2003	89.82	53.60	48.14
Slovenia ¹⁴	March 23, 2003	60.25	89.61	53.99
Hungary	April 12, 2003	45.60	83.76	38.19
Lithuania ¹⁵	May, 10-11, 2003	62.59	91.07	57.00
Slovakia ¹⁶	May 16-17, 2003	52.15	92.46	48.22
Poland ¹⁷	June 7-8, 2003	58.43	77.45	45.25
Czech Republic ¹⁸	June 13-14, 2003	53.96	77.33	41.72
Estonia ¹⁹	September 14, 2003	64.06	66.83	42.81
Latvia ²⁰	September 20, 2003	72.53	69.60	50.48
(Last European Parliament elections, ²¹ 15 EU-member states)	June 10, 1999	49.50		

These data suggest two basic conclusions, both rather different from the "victory march" imagery of accession. First, and quite striking, is that, although participation rates have varied from 45.6% (Hungary) to almost 90% (Malta), the results indicate a

¹⁰ Proportion of eligible voters who cast a valid vote.

¹¹ Proportion of those who said "yes" among those who cast a valid vote.

¹² Valid "yes"-es as % of eligible voters.

¹³ http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/newsletter/weekly_110303.htm#A as of July 5, 2003.

¹⁴ http://www.rvk.si/referendum/eu_nato/eng/ as of July 5, 2003.

¹⁵ <http://www.euro.lt/index.php?LangID=7?TopMenuID=127&LangID=7> as of July 5, 2003.

¹⁶ <http://www.eureferendum.sk/> as of July 5, 2003.

¹⁷ http://www.pkw.gov.pl/katalog/artukul/Obwieszczenie_o_wyniku_referendum_akcesyjnego.htm as of July 5, 2003.

¹⁸ <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ref2003/re13?xjazyk=EN> as of July 5, 2003.

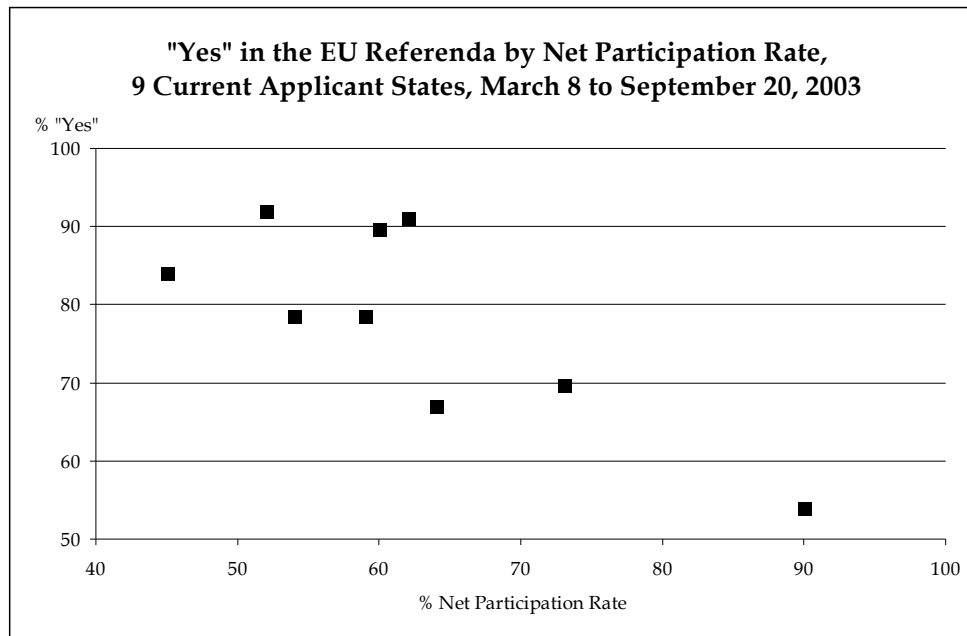
¹⁹ <http://www.vvk.ee/rh03/tulemus/enght.html> as of September 15, 2003.

²⁰ Participation rate: http://www.cvk.lv/cgi_bin/wdbcgiw/base/sae8dev.aktiv03e.vietas?aa=2&plkst=5; % "yes": http://www.cvk.lv/cgi_bin/wdbcgiw/base/sae8dev.bals_rezult_03?p=2&ksk=4 as of September 20, 2003.

²¹ http://www.corbett_euro.demon.co.uk/convcrit.htm as of September 17, 2003.

remarkable degree of consistency across the nine cases. As Figure 1 shows, the percentage of valid "yes" votes was higher in countries where a smaller proportion of the voters decided to vote on accession to the EU and lower where more people went to vote. In other words, how likely voters are to participate in a referendum on accession appears to be inversely related to their opinion on accession, their country's opportunities within the European Union, and the EU's geopolitical project in general. On this basis, it is reasonable to conclude that most of the voters who did not bother to vote are those opposing accession. This is exactly the kind of result you would expect if opponents of accession had a reason to see accession as a *fait accompli*, a geopolitical transformation process taking place on a grand scale, on a scale over which they do not feel they have control. Given the speed and efficiency with which west European capital and the west European-north American geo-strategic alliance have established their control over that part of the world which has just been left behind by the Soviet geopolitical project, the east European voters' resignation is quite understandable.

Figure 1



Perhaps an even more devastating conclusion is to be drawn once we observe the content of this vote. Because the European Union requires that the member state subject itself to the community-level laws, regulations and policies of the European

Union, membership in the EU involves partial relinquishment of sovereignty. The EU is widely described as a supranational polity that embodies the “sharing and pooling” of the member states’ sovereignties. Mistrust in the EU as a sovereignty association explained, to a large extent, the Norwegian and Swiss publics’ reluctance to approve of their government’s efforts at bringing their state into the Union. In the case of the east European entrants, issues of sovereignty are quite a bit more pronounced—if for no other reason, because of their recent experience as members of the Soviet bloc, a supranational polity often, rightly, described as a system that subjected the smaller states’ sovereignty to a global geopolitical logic dictated by the USSR. The losses in substantive sovereignty during the 14 years elapsed since the collapse of the Soviet bloc only underline the significance of formal sovereignty.

It is of course very much an open question of political philosophy to what extent a state or its citizens could actually have the right to relinquish formal sovereignty—the final authority to influence social life within a state’s territory—at all. It is possible to argue that sovereignty is similar to property rights under capitalism to the extent that the bundle of rights that ownership represents includes the right to destroy, dispose of, alienate, or pass on to others, the object of property. This particular argument would imagine the people’s sovereignty, the foundation of republican democracy, as basically similar to property rights. Sovereignty belongs to the people, so they are free to give it away.

It is possible to argue, on the other hand, that sovereignty, particularly the sovereignty of the people is a relationship between the political community of citizens and the state that is fundamentally different from property ownership. According to this logic, sovereignty is more deeply rooted than ownership, and it represents a set of rights and obligations that is not, and ought not to be, subject to capital’s logic of circulation. In this logic, sovereignty is not alienable and, from this perspective, arguments that portray sovereignty as disposable are victims to a neo-liberal fallacy based on analogical thinking.

Be that as it may, even if we accept that “the people” ought to be able to relinquish sovereignty in favour of the sovereignty of another state, the idea of offering sovereignty to the European Union poses two additional challenges, one theoretical, the other stems from the strikingly consistent results of this year’s east and south European referenda on accession to the EU.

The theoretical problem is of course the fact that, while the EU behaves in some respects very much like a state, it is not a state itself in one crucial respect: It does not have an executive apparatus of its own. For executing its output in legal and regulatory materials, it relies on an intricate web of complex institutional arrangements, including the executive apparatuses of its member states as well as various international organizations and foreign actors. Therefore, relinquishment of sovereignty to the EU means a very peculiar kind of transaction, where the sovereignty of the state is transferred, partly, to a supra-state polity (the EU) that has no independent capacity to act—i.e., no sovereignty that is specifically its own—at all.

Then, finally, there is the empirical problem of the nine referenda. Even if we agree for a moment that it is possible for the voters of a state to affirm their government's actions in passing on parts of their formal sovereignty to the European Union, that position still leaves open the question of how they can do so. One sane idea is that, in order to avoid constitutional crises, institutional instability and general political paralysis, that decision had better be supported by a convincing majority of the voters. Conventional wisdom suggests that it would be reasonable to expect a qualified majority—say, two-thirds of the eligible voters—to support a decision of such historic magnitude. Such qualified majority would be required, for instance, if the parliaments of the newly independent states of eastern Europe were to change or amend their Constitution. Of course, the logistical difficulties raised by referenda are several magnitudes bigger than what parliamentary votes involve: It is much more difficult to secure a convincing margin of support to any measure via a referendum than through a vote in parliament. Yet, it can be argued that, given the implications of the decision—after all, giving away parts of sovereignty not only concerns the heart of legitimate authority; it is also an irreversible step—amply justify such stringency. Viewed from this angle, a simple numerical majority—fifty percent of the eligible voters plus one vote—is a rather relaxed standard for a decision.

The numbers in the rightmost column in Table 1 represent the numerical strength of the mandate obtained in each of the nine recent referenda on accession to the European Union. (The strength of the referendum's mandate is computed by multiplying the proportion of valid votes cast—as a percentage of the number of those eligible to vote—by the proportion of valid "yes" votes.)

The results are, clearly, dismal. Six of the nine referenda failed to produce a mandate strong enough to pass even the most relaxed criterion above (fifty percent plus one vote), and none of the nine referenda returned mandates that would even approximate the two-thirds qualified majority of eligible voters. Although it is true that the strength-of-mandate figures are by and large comparable to the voter participation rate in the last EU-elections (see the last row in Table 1), the stakes of the two votes are, clearly, different.

The three states where the strength of the mandate passes the more relaxed criterion—Lithuania (57%), Slovenia (53.99%) and Latvia (50.48%)—are all products of the dissolution of the region's two large multiethnic federal states, the USSR and Yugoslavia. None of them has had a substantial modern history of independent statehood before the collapse of state socialism, and all three have been imagined by their nationalist elites, correctly, as /1/ having a much greater chance of becoming members of the EU "alone" than together with the rest of their federal states, and /2/ as benefiting tremendously from membership in the European Union in terms of being able to prevent the re-establishment of the federal states from which they had just seceded. In this sense, the over-fifty percent strong mandates are to be read at least partly as acts of political catharsis completing the divorce of those seceded states from the USSR and Yugoslavia.

In sum, large-scale geopolitical rearrangements have created a highly contradictory situation in eastern Europe. On the one hand, the EU-accession referenda are formally valid and binding; on the other, they have lent very weak political support to policies of accession. The tensions arising from the co-presence of, and interplay between, the two have produced a pervasive sense of uncertainty and diffidence in eastern Europe today.

Does this mean that one should expect unrest, protest and anti-EU street politics in eastern Europe? Not necessarily. What it is most likely to produce is an unhappy, frustrated accession, marked by pervasive mistrust and resentment. As a result, EU-related politics within the accession states, and, as a consequence, the new member states' behaviour within the EU's decision-making bodies, is likely to be somewhat erratic, unpredictable and occasionally self-contradictory. Irony, self-distancing and a mixture of cooperation and foot-dragging will most likely characterise their behaviour.

Because of their long historical experience in serving as externally dependent buffers with a deeply injured sense of sovereignty, squeezed among four land-based empires—the Habsburg, Ottoman, Russian and Prussian “unions”—the east European states’ political cultures is quite well adapted to the situation of in-between-ness and forced subservience. History has taught them advanced skills to manage ambiguity of interests, multiple alliances, contradictory pressures and arbitrariness. The confusing message sent by the accession referenda fits those historical patterns very tightly.

Source: *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*,
vol. 3, No. 6 (16), November–December, 2003, pp. 51–68