

# Central European Countries and EU Accession: A Blessing or a Curse?

Written by Lisdey Espinoza Pedraza

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LISDEY ESPINOZA PEDRAZA, FEB 17 2015

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The end of the Cold War marked the demise of a *status quo* that had dominated international relations theory and practice since the end of the WWII, and heralded the start of a new paradigm characterised by the collapse of old enemies, the emergence of new countries, international non-state actors and diversified threats. A real distinction between internal and external security was also harder to make. The breakdown of communism led to the creation of new countries in Central and Eastern Europe and provided an opportunity to bring about democracy and stability for the continent which, in turn, would lead to a successful reunification and pacification of the continent as “democracies are less likely to go to war”.<sup>[1]</sup>

The European Union (EU) has dominated European political and economic affairs since its creation. Therefore, enlargement to the east was seen as natural evolution of European affairs to bring an end to division and enhance the security of the whole continent.<sup>[2]</sup> For the EU, this enlargement meant “an extraordinary opportunity to promote stability, prosperity and peace throughout the European continent.”<sup>[3]</sup> The 2004 and 2007 admissions of 10 Central Eastern European Countries (CEECs) changed the shape of the EU dramatically by raising its number of members from 15 to 27. EU membership and the fall of communism were two important events that determined the future of CEECs and their transition from centrally-planned economies to free market ones, and from authoritarianism to western-style democracies.

The decision to open EU doors to CEECs was a triumph of statesmanship and an example of successful crisis prevention.<sup>[4]</sup> Soon after the collapse of the USSR, the EU signed preferential trade agreements with CEECs, and by 1993 it had already set the criteria these countries had to meet should they wish to become EU members. Democracy accompanied by stable institutions able to guarantee it; the rule of law; protection of minorities; market economies; ability to compete equally with other EU members, and being able to take on obligations EU membership entails such as adherence to political and monetary policies. These conditions, although hard to meet for the post-communist CEECs, were very attractive as they symbolised security, consumer prosperity, company wealth, prestige and a clear break from the Soviet era.<sup>[5]</sup> EU integration has also been a process of “redrawing the economic borders inside Europe and amongst former states of the Eastern bloc.”<sup>[6]</sup>

The goal of integrating CEECs into the EU had been widely shared as, with their admission, Europe acted to “lock in democracy and put an end to the geopolitical competition that had bedevilled CEECs.”<sup>[7]</sup> Had CEECs not been accepted, instability and chaos would have sunk in the heart of Europe and the situation would be much worse at present. EU membership not only ensures stability in CEECs but also prevented future conflicts in the whole of Europe. Eastern enlargement does pose important challenges, but also creates new opportunities for increased prosperity for both sides of the continent. CEECs have benefited positively from EU accession by witnessing an important increase in growth, trade, foreign direct investment, off-shoring and outsourcing, and a stronger export penetration into the EU-15 single market. Despite recent political crisis in some CEECs that has led to the resurgence of populist, nationalist and euro-sceptic movements, democratic institutions have prevailed and prevented CEECs from regressing to authoritarian regimes. EU membership has also translated into increased welfare among CEECs

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and has enabled their citizens to travel, study and work freely across boundaries.

## Post-Communist Central Europe and EU Enlargement

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the USSR heralded the end of a historical period in Western and Eastern Europe that resulted in the establishment of fourteen countries in Europe. [8] For the first time in over forty years, Europe was no longer divided into two opposing ideological systems. The end of the Cold War meant an opportunity to “establish a new common European order.”[9] Soon after the collapse of communism in CEECs, the region underwent dramatic changes and countries started moving away from centrally-planned economies to the open market,[10] and more importantly towards democracy. In this context, the EU Eastern enlargement seemed natural to help create security and stability beyond EU-15 borders.

The strategy behind EU enlargement in the 90s was to consolidate democracy across the eastern half of the continent by anchoring CEECs to the West.[11] This is why at the beginning of the 90s; the European Commission sat down at the negotiating table to offer CEECs agreements that fell under the *prevention scheme*: leaving the door open for membership but preventing them from massively applying. This is due to the fact that the fall of the Berlin Wall had catapulted the question of German reunification to the top of the European agenda, and EU member states gave Germany their undivided attention.[12] At this stage, the agreements offered to CEECs were aimed at preparing these countries for their future accession. This series of agreements culminated at the European Council Meeting in Copenhagen in 1993 that established the criteria CEECs needed to meet should they wish to apply for EU membership.

EU membership signified for many CEECs a quick way to prosperity, that although hard to achieve, certainly seemed brighter than continuing with the communist model. Together with the adoption of the Copenhagen criteria, the EU “adopted complex said schemes and conditionality frameworks to facilitate economic transfer, lock in democratic gains, diminish prospects of domestic conflict and cross-border security threats.”[13] The Copenhagen criteria encompassed a set of core political and economic regulations that included: stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, rule of law, respect of human rights, protection of minorities, a functioning market economy, capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU, and the ability to take on the obligations of membership: adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.[14] Countries looking to get EU membership should also bring their institutions, management capacity, and administration and judicial systems up to EU standards.[15] After the collapse of communism, CEECs found themselves in a security vacuum and the fear of returning to totalitarianism, secessionist or nationalist movements, political fragmentation that would endanger security, stability and economic development for CEECs. Therefore, a “quick accession to the EU represented the most effective way to ensure this region remained on the path of growth.”[16]

The EU’s decision to enlarge to the east was also partly influenced by the idea that “democracies do not go to war with each other,”[17]and the hope that democratic states would provide “a key building block for less militarised and more cooperative security structure in Europe.”[18] Establishing democracy would then ensure security through the adoption of the Copenhagen criteria, reviving and reinventing CEECs’ civic life.[19] The enlargement was not a result of a single decision but of a series of meetings held by the European Council, first in Copenhagen in 1993, then in Luxembourg in 1997, and finally in Helsinki in 1999 where the final list of CEECs to be admitted was established. Also with the establishment of the EU minority system and its adoption by candidates, the EU achieved equalisation of ethnic minorities within the EU and it eliminated one of the most dangerous spark of ignition for conflicts in CEECs: minority issues.[20] The outbreak of violence against the Hungarian minority in Transylvania had shown that ethnic violence was not limited to Yugoslavia, therefore, taming such minority conflicts became a major issue for the achievement of sustainable peace in Europe.[21] This alone meant that the enlargement to the east has been one of the biggest steps to ensure CEECs’ security since the end of the Cold War.

The fifth and sixth EU enlargement meant integrating transitional CEECs with centrally-planned economies, and deep economic imbalances. Europe was for the first time integrating wealthy economies with a group of mostly transitional economies.[22] This integration has proved to be successful for CEECs which during the 90s managed to redirect their exports away from the former COMECON and towards the EU.[23]

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## EU Membership's Impact on CEECs

Soon after the collapse of communism most ex-Soviet nations underwent some form of economic liberalisation whose central elements were: sound monetary policy, elimination of hyper-inflation, independence of Central Banks and unification of exchange rates.[24] EU integration in 2004 and 2007 was one of the most significant changes for CEECs since they became non-communist. In 2004 eight former soviet countries became EU members: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, and in 2007 Romania and Bulgaria were granted full membership as well. Just a decade and a half after the collapse of the Berlin Wall most of the CEECs were already part of the EU or were in process of accession. Over these years, "CEECs went through a profound democratic, economic, political and social transformation that made them viable candidates for EU membership." [25]

The first group of countries that were accepted in 2004 were already western-oriented.[26] The first stage of CEECs accession was focused on countries that were already supportive of western values, and critical of Russia. The desire to belong to the EU impacted positively and tremendously on encouraging reforms: "The EU democratisation activity has been highly effective at radiating an initial attraction and then cementing democratic gains through legislation." [27] It is important to note that for many of the CEECs that successfully applied for EU membership the positive consequences cannot be limited to their accession date as "some of the adjustments associated with EU membership began even before their membership application." [28] Candidates before being entitled to full-fledged membership had to undergo a phase-in process during which they had access to a pre-accession fund to help them finance needed reforms.

The consequences of EU membership can be divided into general benefits, economic, political and social ones. At the moment of accession, trade development became the most relevant and unprecedented success story of the enlargement.[29] This is due to the fact that New Member States (NMS) had to comply with EU's external economic policy and thus eliminating intra-EU trade barriers was compulsory.

### *General Impacts of EU Membership*

Eastern EU enlargement put an end to a history of conflict and division among CEECs and gave them the "needed impetus for their political and economic modernisation." [30] This enlargement also brought an end to the division that had marked the European continent since the end of the WWII and brought peace and stability among countries. EU membership also provided CEECs with the advantage of belonging to a community of democracy, stability, prosperity, and a growing internal market with over 500 million people. The 2004 and 2007 enlargements were unique "due to the number of acceding countries, their size, their comparatively low level of economic development, the predominance of their agrarian sector and their post-communist past." [31]

By enlarging to the East, the EU "complemented NATO in filling the security vacuum resulting from the dismantling of the Soviet empire." [32] In this way, the geopolitical area in which Russia could exert pressure was substantially reduced. The Balladur Pact signed in 1993, also made the EU dependant on good neighbourly relations which together with CEECs inclusion has helped diffuse threats posed by the collapse of communism and border disputes. "By contributing to securing Poland's and Romania's eastern borders, the EU could minimise the inflow of migrants, drugs, arms, and human trafficking which had constituted an important security concern." [33] Prospects of membership also helped modernise CEECs and the Copenhagen Criteria encouraged most CEECs to break away from their communist past and undergo a series of reforms and implementation of human rights legislation.

### *Social Impacts*

Eastern enlargement has allowed people from CEECs to travel freely across national boundaries making it easier for them to relocate to other member states. With the help of the Erasmus Programme, young people from CEECs have also been able to complete their studies in Western universities. This possibility of studying abroad is considered positive by 84% of EU citizens.[34] Romanian students and professors, for example, were offered European scholarships to study and train in various western EU Member States (MS) since there was a chronic shortage of

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investment in education and research in Romania.[35] With EU accession, it is also easier for CEECs' citizens to use their qualifications in other MS, making it easier for them not only to study but to work and reside anywhere in the EU without having to retrain in national qualifications and facing the risk of going through a de-skilling process. According to the European Commission, more than fifteen million citizens have moved to other EU countries to work or to enjoy their retirement, benefiting from the transferability of social benefits and the enlargement of the Schengen Area.[36] The open border policies present in the EU also had a positive impact on CEECs' migration: "those open western MS started to attract the most educated people, the effect was positive for growth due to a better allocation of human capital." [37] Brain circulation had a positive impact for NMS as due to the recession of 2009 in many western EU members, many workers returned to their home countries bringing with them new knowledge, contacts and improved competitiveness. CEECs that had massive emigration rates after their official EU accession started to register yearly increases in remittances that not only became an important source of additional income and domestic demand-creating factor but also the main driver of construction industries and an important tool in covering huge and ever-wider trade deficits.[38] The National Bank of Poland estimated at the beginning of 2008 that emigrants transferred over 20 billion Polish Zloty (pln)—twice as much as they did in 2004.[39] During 2011 investment activity in the CEE region represented 2.8% of the total investment value in Europe in 2011, down from 3.1% in 2010.[40]

EU membership also impacted positively on NMS unemployment figures due to the high growth and job-creating effects of sustainable modernisation CEECs underwent after the end of communism. In Hungary for example, after EU accession, employment levels went up from 56.8% in 2004 to 57.3 in 2007.[41] It is also important to point out that according to the Human Development Index, those countries that are members of the EU are amongst the highest positions.[42] Despite this decrease, the number of completed deals continued to rise significantly in CEECs: a total of 195 companies received private equity backing in 2011, an increase of about 17% compared to 2010 when 166 companies were financed with private equity.[43]

## *Economic Impacts*

The EU is one of the strongest and largest economic and free trade areas in the world. It accounts for 25% of the world's GDP and 6% of the world's population.[44] The Eastern enlargement reinforced this as it added to the internal market more than 100 million consumers with rising purchasing power.[45] This has yielded positive results not only for NMS in boosting their industries, but also for Old Member States (OMS) as new jobs have been created to meet an increasing demand. Trade between OMS and NMS grew almost three-fold in less than ten years: it went from €175 billion in 1999 to approximately €500 billion in 2007.[46] For CEECs, EU accession meant a better future, and even before they were granted full membership, they had managed to redirect their trade flows away from the former Soviet bloc and towards new partners in the EU-15.[47] European integration boosted general modernisation and growth performance in CEECs.

Positive impacts of EU membership of CEECs started even before they became full members: after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Eastern European economies such as Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary started to experience strong growth in their GDP.[48] This was due to the fact that countries, even as candidates, were capable to attract significantly more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) than non-candidates and non-EU members as risks and transaction costs were reduced.[49] Through the imposition of economic criteria, governments in CEECs were encouraged to promote reforms for transition to a market economy. FDI and imports originating from the EU accelerated economic reforms in these countries and therefore sped up their integration to the EU and the promised welfare, better standards of living and the economic security that this organisation would provide them with.[50]

Once CEECs were granted full membership, they started enjoying the benefits of European integration: they had full access to a growing market of over 500 million people; barriers to trade, investment and movement of labour disappeared; exchange of knowledge and technology became easier; CEECs' productivity increased and their consumer goods became cheaper, better in quality and more diverse. Economic integration induced by enlargement also had positive effects on high-tech sectors in CEECs[51] as FDI was mainly channelled into industry, infrastructure, energy and telecommunications. Free movement of labour and capital have also helped create a more flexible economy in CEECs. The economic rationale behind free movement of workers is a better allocation of human resources within the common market, and this has led to increased production in destination countries and less

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unemployment in CEECs.

With the inclusion of CEECs, the EU Single Market now accounts for almost 500 million people which means Central Eastern European middle-sized companies now have access to new export markets which previously were not an option due to the cost and hassle involved with border bureaucracy. The enlargement to the East has also brought about increased levels of competition and innovation[52] which have led to higher productivity, lower costs and prices, higher quality, and a greater choice for consumers in CEECs that was practically unattainable under communism. It is also now easier for CEECs to access financial institutions and funds not only within the EU but also from international organisations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Consumers in CEECs are also better protected as the Single Market guarantees that products meet certain minimum standards.

In Poland, between May and August 2007, the first medium- and long-term accession effects became evident: economic growth of 6.5%, declining unemployment rates: in 2003 unemployment rate amounted to 20%, by the end of 2007 it had been reduced to 11.4%. There was a yearly consumption growth of 6%, nominal salaries rose 58% and twelve million jobs were created thanks to FDI.[53] For Poland, transferring sovereignty towards the EU was a small price to pay in exchange of the financial benefits it received. For Hungary, the change came not with the EU-15, but with trade relations with CEECs that joined the EU at the same time Hungary did: free trade of agricultural products became possible only after EU accession and Hungarian small and medium enterprises also became more active: Hungarian imports from NMS increased from €4 billion in 2003 to € 13.7 billion by 2007.[54] In Slovenia, after EU accession a wider financial market developed and it was easier to access capital that stimulated the import-export activity of large, small and medium enterprises.[55] In Bulgaria, its GDP has constantly grown from 34,628 million BGN in 2003 to 56,520 million BGN in 2007.[56] Bulgarian FDI has also increased. CEECs used their membership to increase their trade above average and some also exploited their geographical location to increase their trade with neighbouring states, while others started to focus on rapidly growing global markets.[57] High rates of economic growth and performance which still continue in most CEECs, as well as the successful development of trade between NMS are among the success stories of Eastern enlargement. [58]

## *Political Impacts*

EU accession provided CEECs with substantial and consistent incentives for political reform and moderation of their political practices and institutions. By offering them the “carrot” of membership and establishing accession criteria, the EU imposed certain standards of democratisation “aimed at minimising the danger of a return to authoritarian regimes and centrally-planned economies.”[59] Economic development has also helped minimise political instability and extremism, and has helped build a civil society that has enhanced democratisation processes.

Europeanization has been part of the narrative of post-communist transformation in CEECs. From 1992 to 2002 most CEECs underwent serious political transformation and democratic development seems overall to have progressed well. The Copenhagen criteria and the adoption of the EU’s *acquis* has helped CEECs to resist special interest calls for bad policy, and those CEECs with EU membership prospects pushed their transitions the fastest. To this day, the new post-communist member states remain committed to a parliament system of governance as opposed to the presidential system favoured by most of their counterparts in former Soviet bloc.[60] By doing this, they not only chose a future with the West but also signalled a break from their neighbours who followed a new-Soviet style of governance. The NMS have continued to rotate between centre-left and centre-right parties. Radical alternative have been largely eschewed.[61]

The history of the EU has been tightly linked with a process of deepening (progressive delegation of national powers to supranational institutions) and widening (geographical expansion) NMS brought to the EU’s political scene their own historical experience as well as different political practices. The 2004 and 2007 accessions not only reunified Europe, but were also unprecedented in the fact that ten ex-Soviet countries were offered membership. This would test the institutional framework of the Union. These enlargements implicated a readjustment between OMS and NMS in political and economic terms. The adaptation process NMS underwent before becoming full members helped them quickly overcome the legacy of communism. CEECs did not have any alternative: should they wish to return to Europe, they would have to comply with EU regulations and *acquis*, plus the EU incarnated what CEECs wanted to

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achieve: a democratic system and a market economy.[62] After EU accession, the economic and political outlook in all CEECs looked bright: their economies became more sophisticated, and so did their political systems. However, although at the beginning the EU acted as a deterrent against extremism, and it has certainly helped stabilising “the other Europe”, the impact on NMS’ domestic politics is quite unexplored so far, and since 2004 frequent changes of government have occurred and the political landscape has been marked by the prevalence of national issues, retrograde institutional political fragmentation, and polarisation in most of CEECs.[63] The EU emphasized the economic aspect to the detriment of the political, and while application of conditionality contributed to democratization in most CEECs, it did not produce democratic consolidation as it established a certain kind of democracy that does not reflect the traditional parliamentary form of democracy.

The enlargement process also made politics an area which it is difficult to tamper with. As CEECs have fulfilled EU’s basic political criteria, democratic conditionality and rule of law, the EU has little space for more political pressure as it lacks the legal authority to interfere in its members’ internal affairs. CEECs that long hailed as models of successful democratic transition, have recently descended into political crisis, electoral paralysis and nationalist straying.[64] Nationalism and Euro-scepticism have returned to mainstream CEECs’ politics, and the fight against corruption is still one of the main problems NMS are confronted with.

This, however, has not impacted too badly on CEECs and one can argue the EU has brought about more positive than negative effects in CEECs’ political arena: the bulk of CEECs have been democratised, and the negative effects can be reverted. It has been argued that in the post-communist world there is a positive correlation between distance from the West and regime type.[65] Poland’s commitment to the EU led to changes in the Polish constitution which diminished its ability to exercise authoritarian tendencies. In Romania, it contributed to the 1996 election of the Romanian Democratic Convention that removed the communists from power and eliminated the threat of a possible return to a totalitarian regime. In Hungary in 1998 led to the establishment of a coalition government.

It is true that there have been some negative developments and party systems in CEECs are still weakly institutionalised, membership levels are low, organisation and local implantation is weak and public trust in them is low: in 2008 only 16% of citizens in NMS expressed any trust in parties, against 32% in OMS.[66] Elections, political parties, party systems, parliaments and formal political institutions are the core of democratic consolidation and this is certainly an area of improvement for CEECs.

## *Other Benefits*

EU membership has also made CEECs safer as enlargement has enabled the EU to extend its police and justice cooperation to NMS, widening information exchange and the implementation of the European Arrest Warrant. NMS also joined the system for early exchange of information in the event of radiological emergencies as well as environmental policies to reduce the effects of climate change. “This has further enhanced the security of CEECs and of Europe as a whole.”[67]

NMS transition to a market economy has also been faster and more durable than in other post-communist regions. CEECs that are part of the EU have the most advantageous economic reforms, low inequalities and extensive welfare policies, as well as having experienced consistent economic growth compared to non-EU members in former communist countries.[68] Economic and social indicators show a substantial growing gap between NMS and other parts of the former Soviet bloc. In 2004, the Gross National Income per capita for NMS was \$7,876 while it was only \$1,279 for Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.[69] Similarly, NMS have the lowest poverty levels among former communist countries.

## **Conclusion**

EU enlargement has led to better living standards in NMS. It has also brought about democracy, stability and security in CEECs. Today, Europe is not only bigger but also stronger, more dynamic and culturally richer.[70] Eastern enlargement meant a process of building a new, unified Europe under a completely new way of thinking. The enlargement has been one of the most successful foreign policy initiatives the EU has undertaken to export its values

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to CEECs.

EU membership has also brought about major opportunities for CEECs as it has made them more attractive for outsourcing and off-shoring. Despite the legacy of centrally-planned economies, the CEECs that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 rank relatively highly in terms of economic freedom as their trade with OMS is thriving. FDI in the region has helped create thousands of jobs, and it has generated multibillion profits for companies. Money from the EU budget is now flowing to the east's poorest areas and it is allowing them to restructure, modernise and make them competitive enough to meet western European standards. [71] These benefits have also been made extensive to CEECs citizens as they now enjoy greater freedom and mobility than what they ever experienced under communism. They are now part of an exposing Single Market that comprises 27 members and over 500 million people accounting for 18% of the world's trade and contributing more than 25% of the world's GDP.[72] The EU represents the largest internal market in the world. The extension of the Single Market has also led to increased productivity and competitiveness in CEECs which has translated into positive effects for CEECs consumers in terms of prices, variety, quality of supply in goods and services that were unattainable before.

EU membership and accession prospects also brought about important political benefits in CEECs as accession required compliance with an extensive set of conditions included in the Copenhagen Criteria and the *acquis* of the community. Both placed pressures on CEECs to pursue democratisation processes.[73] The pre-accession process CEECs underwent, allowed them to modernise their political institutions and bring their political practices close enough to meet western standards. Through administrative reform and training, the enlargement policy had "a huge impact on fostering democracy and improving CEECs' security situation." [74] The eight post-communist countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 have been a successful example of democratisation, and transition to a market economy. Recent developments in the political arena in CEECs have posed a question about how effective and lasting political advances in this region will be. There has been a resurgence of nationalism, populism, Euroscepticism, and extremism in their political agendas. Widespread corruption is still a cause of great dissatisfaction with the current political elites. However, resurgence of nationalism and populist movements such as the League of Polish Families, the Hungarian Justice and Life Party, the Greater Romania Party, the Slovenian National party or the Slovak National Party are not exclusive to CEECs political contemporary reality as one can find their counterparts in western EU members, and it can be argued that Central Eastern European extremist movements do not pose a greater threat to EU's stability than the extremist Italian Northern League or the Flemish Interest.

For the EU, the enlargement meant an opportunity to promote political stability and economic prosperity on the other side of Europe. The enlargement has been one of the most powerful policy tools that has helped transform CEECs into functioning democracies and more affluent countries.[75] It has also been able to prevent instability and insecurity that would have emerged as a result of the power vacuum created by the collapse of the USSR: had CEECs not been accepted to the EU, today's Europe would be a messier, less stable, more insecure and more inward-looking place.[76] The EU today encompasses 27 members that represent a unique form of cooperation, namely economic, political and cultural partnership. The EU still maintains the doors of enlargement open to any European country that fulfils the community's political and economic criteria. Today, "the challenge of securing the eastern border has been replaced by the need to extend peace and stability along the Euro-Atlantic community from the Balkans and further into Eurasia." [77] There is a feeling of enlargement fatigue among some western EU members, along with worries of the implications an ever-expanding union would have on the EU's institutions, finances and overall identity. Nonetheless, the region further to the East involves core security and energy interests for the union; therefore, working "to consolidate democratic change and build stability in this area is as important for overall European security today as consolidating democracy in CEECs was in the 1990s." [78]

The enlargement was a unique achievement that heralded a period of prosperity and modernisation for CEECs as well as it signified "unity in diversity and a commitment to promoting prosperity of Europe as a whole through peace, security, solidarity and stability." [79] Europe's diversity is one of its greatest strengths and every member regardless its size, has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to the organisation as a whole.[80]

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*Written by: Lisdey Espinoza Pedraza*

*Written at: University of Leicester*

*Written for: European Integration*

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