

# Central European Countries' Politics After Joining the EU

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### Summary

This paper seeks to assess the impact of the EU on Central European Countries (CEC) whose politics are currently marked by a tendency to nationalism resurgence and Euro scepticism. The paper will also look at the consequences of the end of EU influence (negative conditionality) as a result of CEC accession. There is evidence that enlargement to the East has produced net benefits for the whole Europe. Nevertheless, the impact of the high demanding EU accession path on new members' domestic politics is quite unexplored so far. What kind of correlation can be established between accession and the course of national politics? CEC willingness to reconnect to the Western and the EU promise for membership significantly accelerated the candidates' process of transformation and Europeanization. However, the hasty reconnection neglected some aspects of the regime change that remained unsolved while the very high transformation speed probably left many contradictions open. While the application of conditionality has certainly contributed to the consolidation of democracy it has also established a certain type of democracy that not necessarily reflects the traditional parliamentary form of democracy. The scope for EU influence over conditionality has grown over time causing a sense of frustration among the acceding countries leading, after accession, to a certain detachment from the EU.

### *Introduction*

This paper seeks to assess the impact of the EU on Central European Countries (CEC), whose politics are currently marked by a tendency to instability, fragmentation and nationalism resurgence. We want to highlight the active agent of reform role the EU has played through the admission negotiations (positive conditionality) and the whole process of adaptation to the *acquis communautaire*. The consequences of the end of EU influence (negative conditionality) as a result of CEC accession will also be discussed. There is evidence that enlargement to the East has produced net benefits for the whole Europe (increasing trade, investment and income) and it has helped stabilising the "other Europe". The impact on new members' domestic politics is instead quite unexplored so far. To date, most of the research has been dedicated to the overall successful macro-effects of the enlargement, but it is extremely difficult to establish a correlation between accession and the course of national politics. This paper studies some of these effects in a post-enlargement perspective.

#### *1. After Accession, Political Instability*

One day after joining the EU in May 2004, the Polish prime minister, Leszlek Miller, was forced to resign, followed in June by Czech social democrat prime minister, Vladimir Spidla, and in August by the prime minister of the centre-left government of Hungary, Peter Medgyessy, while in Slovakia the reforms necessitated by entry to the EU made the ruling parties so deeply unpopular that the foreign minister Eduard Kukan was defeated at the presidential elections (April 2004). Since then, frequent changes of government have occurred in all CEC and political landscape has been marked by prevalence of national issues, retrograde interests, political fragmentation and polarisation in all of them. Czech Republic, for instance, finally confirmed a government (January 2007), about seven months after holding a general election (June 2006). However, the three-party coalition still lacks an absolute majority in parliament, and will struggle to push deep structural reforms through parliament. In Slovakia and Poland the coalitions have included extremist populist parties of the left and right. In Hungary after the prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsany (Hungarian Socialist Party) admitted in a leaked audiotape which became public (September 2006) that he had lied about the state of the economy, public protests, encouraged by the main opposition party (the Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union) erupted immediately. As a result, the government suffered a resounding defeat at the October local elections, prompting the prime minister to call for a confidence vote in parliament in order to demonstrate that he could retain his mandate. Once more Poland had elections before the end of the term (October 21, 2007) as a consequence of Jaroslaw Kaczyński's government collapse after months of instability. Although the opposition Civic Platform won over 40% of the vote compared to 32% for Law and Justice (PiS) and voter turnout was quite high, Poland continues to be very polarized and the policies of the previous PiS government remain popular with a large section of the population. Many Polish citizens across voting lines are frustrated with the course of their country politics especially with regard to corruption, unemployment, low salaries.

All cases mentioned prove that since 2004 CEC political scene has been particularly troublesome. Because of the perfect timing one could suspect that a correlation between accession to the EU and the region's instability does exist<sup>1</sup>. What strikes mostly is that political wavering, as usually it happens, has not here been accompanied by poor economic performances. Despite the volatile domestic political environment, the economic outlook of the CEC looks bright, especially after accession: growth is rapid, foreign investments are strong and their economies are becoming more sophisticated, swapping labor-intensive exports with services and higher value-added products. As the European Commission highlights, «The stability provided by accession has helped to multiply trade and investment between EU-15 and EU-10 as well as within EU-10, creating a win-win situation for all involved»<sup>2</sup>. So why have CEC politics been so sparkling since accession? In almost all the CEC and in other newest EU members we also observe an inclination to a more conservative if not backward posture. The burden of history and, in particular, of communism legacy have returned central in CEC political discourse<sup>3</sup>. Fierce rows in such countries as Poland and Romania over how far to probe communist-era collaboration came quite unexpected. The removal in Estonia of a Soviet war monument from the center of the capital, Tallinn, to a military cemetery sparked rioting and looting by several thousand protesters from Estonia's large population of ethnic Russians. These consider the statue as a cherished memorial to wartime sacrifice while Estonians mostly see it rather as a symbol of a hated foreign occupation. All this appears in contradiction with post-89 desire for a rapid modernization and re-conjunction to Western paths of development.

The main purpose of this work is thus to explore how the EU membership has impacted CEC's domestic politics before and in the aftermath of accession. In particular, to what extent frequent severe political strains experienced by CEC governments can be explained by internal factors only or they are also partly connected to the EU membership? What are the reasons for CEC's turning to fragmentation and nationalism? And why are some of them absorbed by controversial issues such as the *Lustrazia* instead of concentrating, for example, on the modernization of the public sector or on playing a constructive role in Europe? Although the current situation in these countries has been above all determined by peculiar national conditions and specific paths of transformation, we will mainly focus on the impact of the EU. The EU has exerted its influence on the CEC primarily through

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<sup>1</sup> The case of Romania confirms the trend: the three-year-old coalition that brought the country into the EU in January splintered just after three months (April 2007) due to acrid infighting between the Prime Minister Calin Popescu Tariceanu and the President, Traian Basescu.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, *Enlargement, Two Years After: An Economic Evaluation*, May 2006 [http://ec.europa.eu/economy\\_finance/publications/occasional\\_papers/2006/ocp24en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/occasional_papers/2006/ocp24en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> A significant example of this trend is the so-called law on *Lustrazia* introduced in Poland (March 15, 2007) which beefs up the vetting of anybody who ever co-operated with the communist-era secret services. The aim is to uproot the *uklad*, a supposed network of communist-era spies and their allies in business and the public sphere, including academics. The Polish government has also prepared a draft of a law to remove communist-era monuments. If the law is passed, it will give local authorities the right to dismantle or transfer monuments to Soviet soldiers and memorials related to the liberation of Poland from the Nazis. Additionally, streets and squares of Polish cities named after the Soviet military or Polish statesmen and party figures of the socialist period can be renamed. A list of such places has already been prepared by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN).

conditionality and Europeanization including the adaptation to the *acquis communautaire*<sup>4</sup>. The whole process of convergence with the EU, required by accession, might have altered CEC domestic dynamics, by accelerating some processes or changing the scale of national priorities. Although CEC have opted for different patterns of reforming the interplay with the EU external pressure has produced similar outcomes. This can probably be considered a proof of the effectiveness of the EU in influencing CEC political course, no matter if what has been imposed was good or not.

In this work, that is essentially explorative, we want exactly to point out how the EU has impacted CEC politics, hoping also to offer some prescriptive hints for improving the EU accession strategy for future members. Furthermore, the “new rules” for accession, by looking at the EU absorption capacity, need a thought also on the new countries political stability and European loyalty.

Ex-post, we can affirm that the Europeanization effects on the CEC should have been better connected to the effects of the concomitant course of domestic transformation. So far, it is still difficult to discern the consequences of EU membership on CEC national politics. In this sense, we feel that the enlargement has not yet been thoroughly scrutinised so that looking at it with the perspective of CEC makes this study still current. Furthermore, rethinking the method of enlargement might help ameliorating and recalibrating the European Neighbourhood Policy which shares with enlargement the same instruments and *ratio* although having a different finality.

## 2. The EU and CEC domestic politics

As we have argued, after a few years from the EU 2004 big enlargement its effects on the new members appear more complicated than it is usually portrayed at the official level. Most of the analyses done before the negotiations were produced by Western

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<sup>4</sup> The principle of conditionality consists in attaching specific conditions to the distribution of benefits to recipient countries on the part of the EU. As K. Smith explained “Political conditionality implies the linking, by a state or international organization, of perceived benefits to another state (such as aid, trade concessions, co-operation agreements, political contacts, or international organisation membership), to the fulfilment of conditions relating to the protection of human rights and the advancement of democratic principles. Positive conditionality can be loosely defined as promising a benefit or benefits to a state if it fulfils the conditions; negative conditionality involves reducing, suspending, or terminating those benefits if the state in question violates the conditions”. K.E. SMITH, *The Use of Political Conditionality in the EU's Relations with Third Countries: How Effective?*, Florence, EUI Working Paper RSC No. 97/7, 1997, pp. 6-7. With the term Europeanization we mean the general process of adaptation of a country to the EU that consists – as Ladrech put it – of “an incremental process of re-orienting the direction and shape of politics to the extent that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy making”. R. LADRECH, *Europeanization of Domestic Politics and Institutions: The Case of France*, in «Journal of Common Market Studies», 32(1), 1994, p. 70. C. Radaelli defines Europeanization as «a processes of construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, “ways of doing things” and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies». See C. RADAELLI, *Whither Europeanization? Concept stretching and substantive change*, European Integration online Papers (EIoP) Vol. 4, 2000, 8, p.4, <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2000-008a.htm>.

Institutes and looked mainly at the EU with a predominant interest in a cost-benefit analysis<sup>5</sup>. Documents with a more policy-oriented approach (EU institutions, think tanks, and EU governments) were marked by “shortermism” prospecting or suggesting step by step solutions without a long term perspective. This might have contributed to channel a pessimistic image of enlargement because most of the benefits for both sides were not to come immediately. While there is a sizeable body of literature investigating enlargement economic impact and its implications for the functioning of the EU institutional setting<sup>6</sup>, in general, there has been little effort to analyse domestic politics in an interactive dynamic with the accession process<sup>7</sup>. The debate on enlargement neither confronted the question of whether the pace of Europeanization was suitable for countries still in transition – democratisation and shifting to a market economy - and if Europeanization in itself was the best path for modernisation. Various groups within the political elite in every Central or Eastern European countries argue exactly that «...the fledgling post-communist democracies needed more time to define themselves and internalize democratic values before knocking on the door of the EU club»<sup>8</sup>.

The question of timing has rarely been fathomed. Which alternative would have been best for the CEC? To wait until the democratic consolidation and the economic liberalization were completed “endogenously” or to enter the EU as soon as possible accelerating the transformation process from within? In the former case, the EU conditionality would have kept reforms on track, in the latter, the accelerated “socialization” would have stimulated the reforming process. As a matter of facts, the EU required CEC to reach a good level of readiness before joining. In order to fulfill its promise of membership and finally complete the 2004 enlargement, the EU decided to take Bulgaria and Romania on board even if they were not fully ready for accession. To remedy possible accession difficulties the EU incorporated some safeguarding clauses in the accession Treaty<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Ekiert and Zielonka have stressed that the literature specialised in Eastern countries have tended to ignore the effects of EU enlargement which is profoundly transforming the politics, economics, and society of the region. G. EKIERT, J. ZIELONKA, *Academic Boundaries and Path Dependencies Facing the EU's Eastward Enlargement*, in «The Next Great Transformation, the EU Eastward Enlargement, Eastern European Politics and Societies», vol. 17, 2003, 1, pp. 3-19.

<sup>6</sup> Much of the debate has been occupied by the ‘constitutional’ adjustments needed for an enlarged Union and on the way the project of the Constitution could be resumed after the failure of the ratification by France and Holland. On the economic impact of enlargement, see in particular the document produced by the European Commission, *Enlargement, Two Years After: An Economic Evaluation*, May 2006, [http://ec.europa.eu/economy\\_finance/publications/occasional\\_papers/2006/ocp24en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/occasional_papers/2006/ocp24en.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> See G. PRIDHAM, *European Union Accession Dynamics and Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe: Past and Future Perspectives*, in «Government and Opposition», Vol.41, 2006, 3, p. 376.

<sup>8</sup> J. PEHE, *Consolidating Free Government in the New EU*, in «Journal of Democracy», Vol.15, 2004, 1, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> In particular three safeguard clauses were included: a general economic safeguard clause; a specific internal market safeguard clause; and a specific justice and home affairs safeguard clause. These safeguards are the same as the ones included in the Accession Treaty of the Member States who joined on 1 May 2004. There are other safeguard mechanisms in the existing EU legal order. In addition to these safeguard clauses, there is a clause which might have postponed the accession of any or both countries by one year, should they have been manifestly unprepared for EU membership (see Article 39 of the Act of Accession).

As for the future, the EU established that «enlargement strategy will be based on consolidation, conditionality and communication, combined with its capacity to integrate new members (the so-called absorption capacity)»<sup>10</sup>. The notion of absorption capacity was first mentioned in the “Copenhagen criteria” as “an important consideration in the general interest of both the Union and the candidate country”. It was defined then as “the Union’s capacity to absorb new members while maintaining the momentum of European integration”. This primarily means analyzing thoroughly the consequences and implications of enlargement not only for the EU as such but also for individual members<sup>11</sup>. Is the EU trying to make future enlargements more digestible for the system and the European demos or is the concept of absorption capacity just a fabrication to limit further EU extensions?<sup>12</sup> Whatever the reason, the practical consequences of the concept remain obscure. As far as timing is concerned, the principle of “absorption capacity” forces to progress on two levels in parallel: candidates’ readiness for accession and the EU’s readiness to receive them.

If we look back at the CEC’s 2004 enlargement, we can not tell for sure what the right accession timing could have been, certainly though the EU has been a formidable external factor helping CEC accelerate transformation, and consolidate democracy.

After accession instead the pace of reforming Europeanization lost momentum while the national political landscape became embroiled everywhere. Besides specific national determinants, we believe that a lot of what is currently happening in the CEC has to do with the way convergence was accomplished and enlargement was managed.

Our assumption is that after the end of the Cold-War political elites and society as a whole have been largely absorbed by both transformation and Europeanization – two concomitant and often overlapping processes – which have rapidly and successfully progressed. After becoming “normal” and “European” states, national politics have regained relevance and governments have increasingly confronted with all those issues still open and neglected in the run to Brussels process. The general political climate of the post-accession period is marked by a phenomenon of decompression

<sup>10</sup> Presidency Conclusions, Brussels, December 14-15, 2006, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/92202.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/92202.pdf). The principle of absorption capacity was firstly spelt out under the term of ‘consideration’ when the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 established the entry criteria in view of the Central and Eastern European Countries accession. Along with the criteria was a further consideration: «The Union capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration, is an important consideration in the general interest of both the Union and the candidate countries». The distinction between a formal “criterion”, which is already difficult to apply impartially, and a mere consideration is not much evident. What is pretty clear is that the Union is now inclined to give more importance to absorption capacity and to the old members’ readiness.

<sup>11</sup> For a critical assessment of the “absorption capacity” see *Europe’s latest big idea is stupid and dangerous*, in «The Economist», July 1, 2006, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> The integration between the EU and the aspirants resembled a modern form of hegemonic power projection where a constant control from the nucleus is wielded towards the outsiders. CEC preferred in fact the term of socialisation instead of integration which implies a dialectical process (by socialisation is meant the capacity of a hegemonic nation or set of institutions to exercise power and secure the acquiescence of other nations, see G.J. IKENBERRY - C.A. KUPCHAN, *Socialization and hegemonic power*, in «International Organization», 44, Summer 1990, 3, pp. 283-315. The EU was not exerting any form of coercion because what it incorporated and exported was desirable for the willing members too. On this issue see S. GIUSTI - L. TAJOLI (Eds.), *Convergence in the Enlarged EU*, Milano 2003, pp. XXII-IV.

and introspection. The end of EU conditionality has produced a deceleration in the reform process, while internal politics have become critical determinants. The party system has also become more divided and polarised. In particular, bipartisan positions typical of the pre-adhesion period vanished. Conservative positions tend to prevail while everywhere we assist to a rebirth of national pride. If before accession, the EU membership was a top priority for the whole society now opposing Brussels has become a sign of state strength and national identity.

Generally, CEC after accession have developed a critical attitude towards the EU, turning into intransigent members which are hardly inclined to compromise. Political elites appear to be less committed to the European project and openly contrast EU decisions where they do not coincide with national priorities (i.e. the adoption of the Euro in Poland) This attitude is mainly evident in foreign policy where CEC do not feel entrapped by European decisions and freely pursue their national interests, often preferring bilateralism to multilateralism (e.g. the Polish veto on the opening of the negotiations for the renewal of the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement as a reaction to Russia's embargo on its meat exports). CEC still value their bilateral ties with the Us in the quest for the hard security that Europe appears increasingly less likely to provide, especially with respect to Russia (e.g. the decision of the Czech Republic and Poland to host a missile defence system which the Us plans to deploy in their territories)<sup>13</sup>.

### 3. *Between acceleration and disillusion*

The pervasive and a fast adaptation process forced the CEC into extremely swift transformations. Among other things, this helped going quickly beyond the legacy of communism. Society has been subject to a sort of political acceleration. The fact that CEC did not have any alternative for "returning to Europe" explains in part their readiness to buy into the EU and to comply with its requirements<sup>14</sup>. CEC opted for a democratic system and a market economy without embarking on any third-way experimentation (socialism and capitalism). CEC political elites were constrained by the existing institutional architecture and by the shortage of political and economic resources for building up new institutions. Europe was already a political space densely institutionalised and increasingly dominated by a single organisation, the EU, itself in constant development. The EU incarnated exactly what CEC wanted to achieve: a democratic system and a market economy. Time was a crucial factor in orienting their internal and external preferences. The urgency of making change irreversible precluded the exploration of alternative pathways. As a result, CEC

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<sup>13</sup> On the CEC's americanism see S. GIUSTI, *Le relazioni transatlantiche: la prospettiva dell'Europa centro-orientale* in V.E. PARSİ, S. GIUSTI, A. LOCATELLI (Eds.), *Esiste ancora la Comunità Transatlantica? Europa e Stati Uniti tra crisi e distensione*, Milano 2006, pp. 197-231.

<sup>14</sup> The central theme of 1989-revolutions and post-Communist changes is grasped by the metaphor of "returning to Europe". Ash noted that "In all the lands, the phrase people use to sum up what is happening is the return to Europe". See T.G. ASH, *We the People; The Revolution of 89*, Cambridge 1990, p. 3.

inescapably turned to the West, where countries were simultaneously converging towards a common political and economic path<sup>15</sup>.

The Euro-Atlantic alliance offered an attractive package, combining the market economy's material prosperity with liberal democracy's heritage of political freedom and security. After all, the fact that convergence on the Western model was a good choice was corroborated by a self-evident argument: the Euro-Atlantic system had survived the Cold War almost intact as the undisputed winner, while the Soviet system had crumbled. Moreover, by imposing tight economic and political conditions in exchange for material incentives, international organisations (the World Bank, IMF, and EU) consistently orientated reforms in CEC and made the EU choice even more likely. In a sense they helped to make the path of European integration inevitable for the CEC.

Another simple consideration should be made: CEC would have probably been amongst the EC founding members if they had not been on the "wrong" side of the iron curtain. Therefore, joining the EU was nothing but the natural sequence of what history had artificially interrupted. At the same time, "the return to Europe" has been overestimated in terms of positive effects and society change. People certainly nourished inflated expectations also as a consequence of long lasting isolation from Western pathways.

In the aftermath of 1989, CEC transformation was described as a rush for "catching up" with the West. CEC's main goal was to get rid of Soviet domination in the least painful and dramatic way possible and to quickly connect up with Western Europe. Hankiss underlined that Central and Eastern Europe countries were obsessed with the "*nevrose de l'arriétation*"<sup>16</sup>. In particular the aim of "matching up to the market" determined both content and pace of the whole transformation. The acceleration of transformation helped by the simultaneous process of Europeanization contributed to remove any attempt to open a debate on communism and to embark on a controversial and time consuming process of "purification". But now the burden of history and, in particular, the legacy of Communism, has returned to centre stage in CEC political discourse. Why has this issue after so long time regained political lime light in some of the new EU members and particularly in Poland?

Generally there was a discrepancy between expectations and reality. As Stompka explained «No wonder that such an amazing feat of world change and such a powerful

<sup>15</sup> The collapse of communism in the East was concomitant with the affirmation of a global liberal capitalism "ideology" in the West and the decline of political passions. As Furet put it "we live in a closed political universe". F. FURET, *Europe after Utopianism*, in «Journal of Democracy», Vol. 6, January 1995, 1, p. 80. Hankiss observed that «In the field of ideas and ideologies, the West has not been able to offer much help. It has arrived almost empty-handed. The social democratic ideology has been in retreat now for more than a decade; it has not been able to renew itself or to credibly distance itself from other forms of socialism. Classical conservatism has not been able to break the resistance of an essentially egalitarian and anti-elitist East European populace. Liberalism has become an important element of public discourse, but its mainly or, in the case of neo-liberalism, exclusively economic and political philosophies have no answer to everyday problems and existential anxieties of ordinary people». E. HANKISS, *European Paradigms: East and West, 1945-199*, in «Daedalus», Vol. 123, Summer 1994, 3, pp. 115-126.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by J. RUPNIK, *Le retour de l'histoire en Europe centrale*, in «Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire», 36, Oct.-Dec. 1992.

affirmation of human agency released widespread enthusiasm, elation, euphoria and unbridled optimism. Everything seemed so easy and promising. But soon the post-Communist societies were to wake up from the happy dream»<sup>17</sup>. This also regards the expectations attached to the EU often identified with the “return to Europe”. It is proved that the more a country is far from reaching membership the more public opinion is enthusiastic about it. As Bozoki put it,

«As long as the expectations of the society were matched with international expectations could be answered by formal institutional expectations, and as long as these expectations could be answered by formal, institutional arrangements, the technocratic and pragmatic elite of the Polish and Hungarian communist successor parties were politically successful. With the accomplishment of the EU membership which marked a point of a non return to the past and indeed the end of the communist legacy, the communism and the past became paradoxically a crucial question»<sup>18</sup>.

The role of the EU in stimulating the process of CEC transformation might have been overestimated. The modification of the civil and political attitude of societies long exposed to communism and isolated from Western pathways takes certainly longer than the years needed to bring to an end the EU accession process. Democracy is certainly more than just a set of rules and firmly rooted institutions. As Jiri Pehe points out «Even countries in which democratic procedures such as elections, checks and balances, and the rule of law function fairly well may not be very democratic. There is a side of democracy that is intangible and cannot be easily quantified»<sup>19</sup>.

Regarding Europeanization as a path of modernisation the question is whether European integration and convergence towards a neo-liberal type economy were really the best tools in view of CEC transformation. Regional economic conglomerations such as the EU are generally strengthened by a bloc competitive logic that may hinder a diversification of relations and scale back a country strategic portfolio. It has been argued that «limiting the search for effective institutions and organizational forms to the Western quadrant of tried and proven arrangements locks in post-socialist economies to exploiting known territory at the cost of forgetting (or never learning) the skills of exploring new solutions»<sup>20</sup>. On the one hand, the EU has promoted modernization but, on the other hand, by limiting institutional diversity and path development innovation, has prevented flexibility and the finding of new solutions in the long run.

#### 4. The effects of EU conditionality (Positive conditionality)

The strongest instrument of the EU penetration in the CEC has been the principle of conditionality extensively applied in the pre-accession period. By conditioning the reforming patterns of CEC, the EU has also inevitably shaped their politics. To explain the current political instability we have to look at conditionality from a double

<sup>17</sup> P. STOMPKA, *Civilizational Incompetence: The Trap of Post-Communist Societies*, in «Zeitschrift für Soziologie», 22, p. 85-95.

<sup>18</sup> A. BOZOKI, *The End of Post communism*, in «EES discussion Paper, Meeting Report 306», September 24, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> J. PEHE, *Consolidating Free Government*, cit., p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> S. GRABHER - D. STARK (Eds.), *Restructuring Networks in Post-Socialism: Legacies, Linkages and Localities*, Oxford, 1996.

perspective: the effects it has produced as a result of CEC compliance during the pre-accession period and the consequences of the end of the “conditionality regime” after CEC joined the EU.

The scope for EU influence over conditionality has grown over time and, given its leverage over CEC, bent on joining, this influence was extraordinary so long as membership remained a promise and became increasingly probable. At the beginning of the process CEC were absorbed by internal reforming and started to converge to the EU model in the view of joining. In 1993, the EU formally listed the entry criteria and since then the EU had an extraordinary power to influence CEC choices because the selection for the first wave of enlargement was still open while the date of accession was uncertain. CEC were very receptive to meeting EU requirements and ready to anticipate future demands (anticipatory adaptation). The logic was to behave as “de facto” members before becoming “de jure” members. CEC competition for entry into the EU favoured the practice of “anticipatory adaptation” and indirectly expanded what can be termed the “informal *acquis*”. If one of the CEC accepted or even anticipated Brussels’ requests, it would have been harder to argue why others could not do the same. After the Schengen agreements were incorporated into the Treaty of Amsterdam, the policing of the Eastern frontiers became *de facto* an additional entry requirement, with which CEC accordingly tried to comply before accession<sup>21</sup>. Likewise, CEC made efforts to fulfil the Maastricht convergence criteria while still candidate countries even if these were not compulsory and were indeed rather risky for their economies<sup>22</sup>.

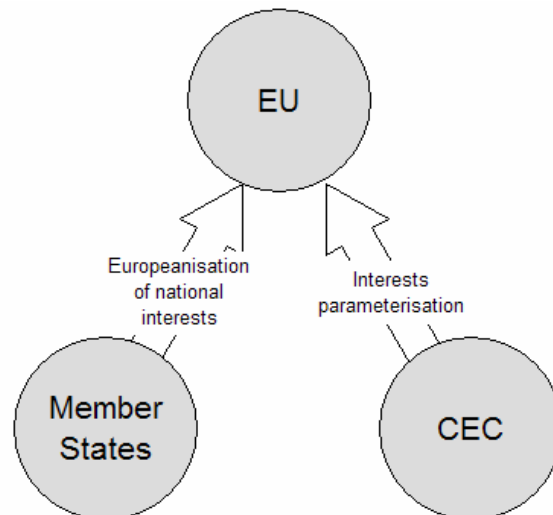
Furthermore, during the negotiations, among the EU member states there has been a common tendency to exploit that context for the promotion of specific national interests well beyond the principle of conditionality. This has been possible through what we can term “triangulation” – by transforming their national claims into European requirements when bilateral attempts failed to extract concessions from a particular applicant. In this way, national claims were transformed into European requirements, increasing the EU entry criteria regime<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> The EU Commissioner in charge of the single market made it clear to the Polish government that Poland would also be judged on how well it could police its borders. See E. BORT, *Illegal Migration and Cross-Border Crime: Challenges at the Eastern Frontier of the European Union*, EUI Working Paper RSC 09, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> In accordance with the EU Treaty, new member states cannot immediately adopt the Euro upon accession. However, as for all member states, economic policy has now become a matter of common concern and hence is subject to policy co-ordination and multilateral surveillance procedures.

<sup>23</sup> Under pressure from Austria, the EU asked for instance, Slovakia to close down the two oldest reactors of the Bohunice nuclear power station. In reply, the Slovak Economy Minister, Ludovit Cernak, stressed that the total cost of closing that nuclear plant is an extremely high price for the Slovak economy and they would have needed at least compensation. See R. ANDERSON, *Slovakia: EU talks plea*, in «Financial Times», 15 September 1999.



*Figure 1 Triangulation: National claims are transformed into European requirements*

In the course of negotiations in order to close all the chapters, CEC even came to accepting transitional periods for some crucial policies. Although Brussels could still count on a superior position, CEC became more assertive. At that point, a failure to proceed with enlargement would have been more damaging for Brussels than for the CEC. After the closing of negotiations and the signature of the accession Treaty (2002-2004), EU conditionality power dramatically plummeted. In the interim period before effective membership, CEC enjoyed the greatest leverage. They reached their goal (EU membership) but they had yet to fulfil all the EU obligations.

The EU also interfered with the political course of Slovakia. The general elections of September 22, 2002 suffered from an evident interference by the EU and Us in the electoral process. Both unions made it very clear that if the Slovaks had voted for the former prime minister, Meciar, then Slovak membership of the EU and NATO would have been out of question. The Commissioner for enlargement, Verheugen, advised the Slovaks not to vote for the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia and warned the other parties not to form a coalition with it<sup>24</sup>. It is difficult to judge to what extent the EU influence on Slovakia could be still considered a form of “conditionality” based on the accession criteria or rather a form of strong external influence beyond the European standard requirements.

The EU reaction to a letter of solidarity with the US (31 January 2003) in the context of Iraq's crisis signed by the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland together with Denmark, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom was also criticised. The European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee chairman, Elmar Brok (7 February 2003), stressed that the speed with which some candidate countries rallied behind the Us stance in the Iraq's question and disregarded EU positions could ultimately endanger those candidates' accession. The chairman of the EU Convention, Valery

<sup>24</sup> See Financial Times, September 17, 2002 and Helsinki Human Rights Groups, *News Bulletin*, 19 September 2002.

Giscard d'Estaing, warned that the Maastricht Treaty calls for EU member countries to support without reservation the EU's joint foreign policy and to refrain from steps that might diminish its effectiveness. And finally, the French President Jacques Chirac condemned candidates' pro-US stance and accused them of being childish and irresponsible.

As a reaction, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Adam Rotfeld affirmed that his country

«... also has a right to decide what is in its own good, and France should in its turn consider it with respect. The chairman of the Hungarian parliament's EU Integration committee, Istvan Szent-Ivanyi, confirmed that: "No-one can oblige candidates to be silent" and Slovak Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan pointed out that he does not comprehend "...why Mr Chirac is not criticising Italy, Spain or Portugal. After all, they said exactly the same... I do not like it, and I do not think this way of marking us out is justified».<sup>25</sup>

Besides a comprehensible irritation, CEC were also disappointed because some of the EU members supported the Us. Therefore, the distinction was not between "old" and "new" members but rather between "pro-American" and "anti-American" countries.

Already during the accession negotiations, leading politicians in the candidate countries were no longer embarrassed to affirm that the enlargement process was asymmetric. Public opinion too shared the idea that the EU had the most to gain from the whole process. According to Ceorg, 44% of Poles, 34% of Czechs and 24% of Hungarians believed that the EU states had more to benefit from current relations than their respective countries. In Poland only 6% thought that the three countries would have benefited more, the figure standing at 16% in the Czech Republic and 23% in Hungary. Hungary's optimism in this respect derived from its more firmly market-oriented mentality, the consistent presence of FDI (Foreign Direct Investments), and the conviction held by economic actors that enlargement will have had positive effects on the economy at large.

The progressive detachment from the EU was also testified by the referenda held on the EU accession where, high support for membership came on the back of low participation rates. In Poland, where the turnout had to reach 50% for the result to be valid, the turnout was the highest while in Hungary was below 50%. In table 1 referenda turnouts are compared with the most recent elections in each country. In three cases, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, turnout was lower in the referendum than in the previous election, while the opposite was for Poland. Since all the CEC, except Czech Republic, had limits requiring a certain minimum participation, not voting corresponded to opposing the accession to the EU, especially when opinion polls conducted shortly before the vote forecasted low turnouts. This result can be connected with a deteriorating support for the EU. Moreover, people tend to cast their vote on the basis of expected gains and losses and thus the low turn out could reflect modest economic prospects of the time<sup>26</sup>. Doyle and Fidrmuc offer an additional explanation: voters would have used the accession referendum to show their discontent with the current government. However, if membership in the EU appeared

<sup>25</sup> Comments reported by BBC News, February 18, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> This explanation has been elaborated by O. DOYLE - J. FIDRMUC, *Who is in Favour of Enlargement? Determinants of Support for EU Membership in the Candidate Countries' Referenda*, IIS Discussion Paper No. 45, November 2004.

beneficial for most voters, not profiting of these gains would be a high price for sending a message to the governments.

*Tale 1: Results of Referenda in the CEC April-June 2003*

Country	Date	Result		Turnout %	Turnout in the most recent parliamentary election
		Yes	No		
<b>Hungary</b>	12 April	84	16	45.6	70.5 (2002)
<b>Slovakia</b>	16-17 May	93	7	52.2	70.0 (2002)
<b>Poland</b>	7-8 June	77	23	58.9	46.3 (2001)
<b>Czech Republic</b>	13-14 June	77	23	55.2	58.0 (2002)

*Source: Gallup Europe, Enlargement poll Monitor and Electionworld.org*

A low turnout was also recorded in the occasion of European elections held on June (10-13) 2004, almost a year after accession.

*Table 2: Turnout Trends in the EP elections 2004*

Country	Turnout %
<b>Hungary</b>	38.5
<b>Slovakia</b>	16.9
<b>Poland</b>	20.
<b>Czech Republic</b>	28.3

##### *5. Europeanization and transformation*

The effects of conditionality go beyond negative feelings. Having influenced the process of democracy consolidation and having established the reforms timing and priorities, the EU contributed diffusing legitimate norms and played a key role in the transition from past legacy to European politics and policies. By doing so it also directed and oriented the process of transformation in the CEC with consequences on domestic politics. The policy reforms schedule imposed by Brussels in some cases clashed with the CEC national political agenda. Euro-compatible reforms did not necessarily serve countries in transition which are now confronted with the consequences of an accelerated transformation process driven by the EU. As Pridham pointed out, «The standard “list system” the Commission adopted for monitoring the political conditions indicated this just as did the Commission’s avoidance of any model of democracy»<sup>27</sup>. Nevertheless, the way Brussels dealt with CEC affected the balance of power among institutions influencing also the kind of democracy implemented.

<sup>27</sup> G. PRIDHAM, *European Union Accession Dynamics*, cit., p. 381.

The EU conditionality has certainly affected the political elites involved in the adaptation but it is still difficult to say how much it has affected the process of democratisation in broad terms (political parties, civil society). Conditionality is a top-down process having effects especially at institutional level rather than intermediary and societal levels. Europeanization also entailed the strengthening of the executive power over the Parliament that could have been risky for young democracies. As Zielonka has pointed out, traditional parliamentary form of democracy is likely to suffer as a consequence of joining the Union<sup>28</sup>. Grabbe has explained that already in the course of negotiations a central role was given to the government. Applicant countries can obviously organise accession preparations in several different ways, however, «in all cases the executive is privileged over the legislature and judiciary in terms of political attention and commitment of resources, both human and financial»<sup>29</sup>.

As far as the bureaucracy is concerned, only those branches exposed to Europeanization resulted positively affected. The principle of conditionality has mainly impinged on political elites and it has only touched some aspects of political life (imperfect convergence). Moreover, conditionality aimed at ensuring that democratic institutions, set up by each country in the early phase of transition, were really accountable and stable, that the rule of law became deep-rooted and that political pluralism and minority positions were fully respected. As a result, conditionality did not deal with the establishment of democracy in itself. Democratic consolidation as an effect of Europeanization consisted in a “residual work” involving the strengthening of existing democratic institutions and practices. Implicitly, the Commission has recognised that some problems of adaptation have occurred starting from the negotiations. As a result, rules governing the accession process provide now for stricter conditionality at all the stages of the negotiations. The European Council (December 2006) decided that «difficult issues such as administrative and judicial reforms and the fight against corruption will be addressed at an early stage»<sup>30</sup>.

The fight against corruption is one of the main problems new members are confronted with. Although the Commission has repeatedly signalled it in its monitoring Reports, the accession process has not substantially contributed to reduce the phenomenon. As stressed by Grigorescu, East-Central Europe has been characterised by an eruption of corruption. Politicians are increasingly blaming corruption for many of the economic and social problems CEC are currently confronted. It has been noticed that the region has become “obsessed with corruption” as the case of Poland shows. In almost all the CEC some high-ranking officials have been replaced for being accused of corruption. This has caused a growing discontent among citizens and ultimately a certain distrust of the democratic system.

Corruption is one of the main reasons of a general dissatisfaction with the current political order and it has become a very popular argument for criticising the democratic

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<sup>28</sup> See J. ZIELONKA, *The Quality of Democracy after Joining the EU*, Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Club de Madrid in Prague, November 2005, [http://www.clubmadrid.org/cmadrid/fileadmin/Nov05\\_WG3\\_Jan\\_Zielonka.pdf](http://www.clubmadrid.org/cmadrid/fileadmin/Nov05_WG3_Jan_Zielonka.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> H. GRABBE, *How does Europeanization affect CEE governance? Conditionality, diffusion and diversity*, in «Journal of European Public Policy», Vol.8, 4, 2001, p. 1016.

<sup>30</sup> Presidency Conclusions, Brussels, December 14-15 2006, p. 3.

governments and advocating a stronger role for the state. The rhetoric of corruption is being exploited by political parties<sup>31</sup>. The World Bank's Report on corruption has pointed out that in the 16 years since the start of transition in the former socialist economies of Europe and Central Asia, corruption has been a pivotal issue<sup>32</sup>. Although many progresses have been made, corruption is not falling in all countries or all sectors, and even the most successful reformers still tend to have higher levels of corruption than in Western Europe. Corruption continues to weigh most heavily on new private firms that are the engine of growth and employment in the region. Although a consistent economic growth, generally new EU members are lagging behind EU's older members on what is called "economic governance" (customs and labour codes, tax and judicial systems...).

The fact that membership was made conditional on respect for democracy and the market economy along with the absorption of the *acquis communautaire* (it amounted to some 80,000 pages) gave Brussels the possibility to perform an extensive "normative" role. The EU provided a macro-political frame of reference within which the CEC governments created and interpreted norms and adapted rules. The stress over the accession requirements lowered the political significance of enlargement reducing it to a normative and technical mechanism. By bureaucratizing enlargement, the EU could delay conflicts of redistribution, avoid confronting its real implications and hold over the debate on how to mould a ground-breaking institution. As Schimmelfennig and Wagner pointed out,

«...*acquis* conditionality resulted in a mushrooming of regulatory agencies in the candidate countries, installing a technocratic regulatory state on top of the democratic institutions in play. In sum, the EU might have the same ambivalent impact on democracy as in some of the older member states, which have emerged from a non-democratic past: firmly anchoring democratic institutions at the national level while undermining them at the supranational level»<sup>33</sup>.

All this in addition to the "depoliticisation" of some political issues due to the fact that national governments have lost a degree of influence in some areas.

Lacking symbolic and real resources and alternatives, the CEC had little chance influencing the EU enlargement policy. In the early 1990s CEC preferred an imitative approach - being as Europeanized as possible - that should have guaranteed them a place in the EU in the shortest lapse of time. The high bureaucratization of EU enlargement ended to limit the public debate on the implications of that choice. Afterwards CEC wanted also to «...make an impression with their character, diligence, and personality». CEC sought to present themselves as a bridge between the EU and the rest of Eastern Europe. CEC also maintained bilateral options (a kind of all-fronts blitz) such as strong relations with the Us. These options reflected not only a concern with particularistic interests and the maintenance of strategic flexibility but also the

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<sup>31</sup> A. GRIGORESCU, *The Corruption Eruption in East-Central Europe: The Increased Salience of Corruption and the Role of Intergovernmental Organizations*, in «East European Politics and Societies», Vol. 20, 3, 2006, pp. 516-549.

<sup>32</sup> The World Bank, *Anti-Corruption in Transition 3: Who is Succeeding ...and Why?*, July 2006, [www.worldbank.org/eca/act3](http://www.worldbank.org/eca/act3).

<sup>33</sup> F. SCHIMMELFENNIG - W. WAGNER, *Preface: External Governance in the European Union*, in «Journal of European Public Policy», n. 11, 2004, 4, p. 676.

pursuing of power politics ambitions. More assertiveness however did not mean a more awareness of CEC people on the significance and consequences of joining the EU.

#### 6. *The end of conditionality*

The end of the conditionality regime had several implications<sup>34</sup>: 1) reconsideration of the reforming agenda and priorities; 2) pace of reforms; 3) disappearance of bipartisanship; 4) less effective use of the EU as an scapegoat for domestic hardships. With the end of the accession negotiations and a lack of an external pressure internal politics became critical determinants (state capacity, party-political consensus on integration, unfinished reforms) in the political course of the CEC. The post-accession has been marked by what we could call a process of introspection. At the same time, a looser control from Brussels produced a deceleration in the reforming process. Economic parameters continue to be positive but in many other respects the region is stagnant or rather going backwards. The reform momentum has run out.

The political scene has also become fragmented and polarized. There is a rich literature dealing with new members' political parties system<sup>35</sup>. Here we want just to stress one of the most evident consequences of the accession to the EU: the deterioration of the so-called bipartisanship. The prospect of membership often helped parties in the CEC to reach a consensus on issues of domestic policy (bipartisan alliances), creating a certain stability for the policy environment. Before accession political tensions due to hard economic reforms generally tended to be voiced through alternation in power in a way that did not challenge the consensus over EU membership. No matter who was in power, the project of European integration was considered a common and vital objective for the country. Former Polish Prime Minister, Buzek, for instance affirmed that his country's admission to the EU was a "great national task" that should be pursued jointly by the government and the opposition<sup>36</sup>.

CEC bipartisanship also helped dissipating Western concerns over the fragility of their ruling coalitions. Poland's negotiator, Jan Kulakowski, affirmed that parties have struck

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<sup>34</sup> The EU can only count on a residual conditionality linked to the CEC accession to the EMU. CEC in fact have not the right to opt out from the EMU.

<sup>35</sup> Number of political parties has reduced but not yet solid political parties have emerged. Frequent changes of governments are not caused by people pursuing alternative political projects but by a general discontent that bring them to change. Political parties tend to be more extreme because they are not prepared to handle certain situations (see Hungary). In the West the political party system is more used to ups and downs both in politics and expectations. For an in-depth analysis of parties in Eastern Europe see H. KITSCHOLT *et al.*, *Post-Communist Party Systems. Competition, Representation, and Inter-Party Cooperation*, Cambridge 1999. See also A. M. GRZYMAŁA-BUSSE, *Redeeming the Communist Past. The Regeneration of Communist Parties in East Central Europe*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 123-174; K. VON BEYME, *Parties in the process of consolidation in East-Central Europe*, in G. PRIDHAM - A. ÁGH (Eds.), *Prospects for democratic consolidation in East-Central Europe*, Manchester 2001, pp. 146 and 154. And more recently IDEA, *Political Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: In Search of Consolidation*, March 2007, [http://www.idea.int/publications/pp\\_c\\_and\\_e\\_europe/index.cfm](http://www.idea.int/publications/pp_c_and_e_europe/index.cfm).

<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the Polish largest opposition party, the Democratic Left Alliance, pledged co-operation in speeding up the approval of EU-related laws, RFE/RL, February 17, 2000.

“a non-aggression” accord on Warsaw’s drive to join the EU by 2003 as the signature of the pre-elections (September 2001) “European integration Pact” proved<sup>37</sup>. In Hungary, the heads of Parliamentary groups of the parties represented in the National Assembly and the representative of the government issued a “Joint Statement” in which they committed to conclude internal preparation by 2002<sup>38</sup>. CEC also gave assurances about future behaviour within the EU, as Geremek put it, «The philosophy of “mission accomplished is alien to us, because we are well aware of the amount and scope of effort we still have to do in order to be politically, mentally and materially compatible with other members»<sup>39</sup>.

The fact that the maintenance of the internal cohesion was part of the accession strategy is proved by the political turmoil in Poland and the Czech Republic that followed the signature of the Accession Treaty<sup>40</sup>. The leader of the Peasant Party (PSL) Kalinowski, who was in the government when Poland closed accession negotiations, threatened that his party would have voted “no” in the June referendum if the government had not passed a special legislative package on farm policy<sup>41</sup>. Leading political figures, in the opposition when CEC were invited to join the EU, played up the downside of negotiations outcome. «We put the pot on the stove and started cooking, the government (current) has let the meal burn», affirmed former Hungarian Prime Minister Orban. Lech Walesa, the symbol of Polish resistance to the communist regime, stressed that his country paid “a heavy price” for membership<sup>42</sup>.

Now that the unifying factor of seeking EU membership has disappeared, CEC have focussed on domestic politics and work on the unfinished aspects of transformation. CEC governments might still be tempted to blame domestic difficulties on the EU, in effect avoiding responsibility using Brussels as a scapegoat even if after accession this is less credible. Such a political behaviour might reinforce Euro sceptic sentiments, especially at times of political instability and internal social discontent, and also reduces national governments' will to embark upon important but still needed painful reforms. Problems already familiar in Western Europe, such as the lack of legitimacy and trust in the EU institutions, tend to emerge in the new member states. The dynamics of national politics in the new members can thus force them to be “awkward” members of the EU, as their governments seek to maximise tangible benefits to appease sceptical populations. In Poland, for instance, Euro scepticism blends with populism. The League of Polish Families, a nationalist party in the government coalition vowed to fight to prevent a new EU treaty from being ratified (the treaty was

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<sup>37</sup> RFE/RL, April 27, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Joint Statement of the Parties represented in the National Assembly of the Republic of Hungary and of the Government on the current issues of the accession process, Budapest, 11 September 2000, [http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/joint\\_hungary](http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/docs/joint_hungary).

<sup>39</sup> B. GEREMEK, *Security of Central Europe*, 15th International NATO Workshop, Vienna June 22, 1998.

<sup>40</sup> The Polish Prime Minister, Miller, and his Democratic Alliance parted ways with the coalition partner, the Peasants's Party, after the latter opposed tax increases central to accession plans. And Vladimir Spilda, the Czech Prime Minister, called a vote of confidence for his government, following the election of the opposition party candidate, Vaclav Klaus, the country's new president who is also a well-known Euro sceptic (March 2003).

<sup>41</sup> RFE/RL, March 14, 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Both quoted in a collective article *EU: “Engaged , At Last”*, December 10-16, 2002, <http://www.tol.cz>.

agreed at the European Council – June 21-22, 2007) after Poland's Kaczynski twins dropped a threatened veto under pressure from the EU heavyweights), saying the charter went against Polish family values and national interests.

### 7. Conclusions

The current course of CEC politics is greatly influenced by domestic factors. Yet the fact that all CEC present similar dynamics, e.g. political instability surfacing immediately after accession, induces to assume that the EU must have had a role in that. The EU has impacted CEC domestic politics in various ways, but particularly through the accession strategy. CEC willingness to reconnect to the Western and the EU promise for membership significantly accelerated the candidates' process of transformation and Europeanization. The hasty reconnection neglected some aspects of the regime change that remained unsolved to surface eventually, an example being the question of *Lustrazia* in Poland. The very high transformation speed probably left many contradictions open.

While the application of conditionality has certainly contributed to the consolidation of democracy it has also established a certain type of democracy that not necessarily reflects the traditional parliamentary form of democracy. Generally, the executive has been privileged over the legislature and judiciary. As a result, the executives have been reinforced as well as those parts of the bureaucratic apparatus closely involved in the Europeanization. On the contrary, national parliaments have resulted less powerful democratic players. The whole process has been characterised by a certain depoliticization due both to the fact that national governments have lost a degree of influence as a result of devolving some power and competences to the EU level – the substance of the process of European integration, and to the bureaucratisation of the enlargement that has seriously limited the debate on enlargement.

The scope for EU influence over conditionality has grown over time and in some cases Brussels has overused its large leverage over the CEC. This has caused a sense of frustration among the acceding countries leading, after accession, to a certain detachment from the EU progressively accompanied by a critical posture. As a result, CEC are now quite intransigent members not very inclined to compromise. In foreign policy, they do not disregard strengthening bilateral relations with key actors such as the Us. Once members of the EU, CEC have also become more introspective and internal politics have now regained the scene making it particularly lively as proved by frequent governments change. The disappearing of the EU as a catalyzing external factor has ended out also bipartisanship and internal cohesiveness. More simply, one could suppose that as the EU has been affected by an enlargement fatigue so the CEC are suffering a democracy fatigue. Rupnik calls it a phenomenon of decompression: «As soon as they joined, there's a phenomenon of decompression, of exhaustion of the pro-European coalitions, and we now see even a backlash with Euro skeptic, sometimes even Europhobic overtones»<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> J. RUPNIK, *EU: We cannot afford a pause in enlargement*, Interview by RFE/RL, October 11, 2006.

We can conclude that even if it is difficult to assess the weight and the consequences of the EU influence over CEC current politics nevertheless this correlation does exist. The EU has a great power shaping willing members and also new members with the only mean of the absence of power (negative influence). The EU influence pre and after accession should be more extensively considered in the next waves of enlargement and even in the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy.