The Challenge of Enlargement and Cohesion in the Ten New Member States

6.1 Introduction: The preparation for enlargement

Since the 1st of May 2004 the European Union incorporates over half a billion people and extends to the historical limits of the European continent. The enlargement towards the East and South has transformed the Union from the assembly of fifteen nation-states to a union of almost all of the countries that consider themselves to be part of Europe. The difference is not just quantitative but it represents a qualitative change in the nature of the EU. The increase of the membership in the European Union to twenty-five member states represents the realization of the vision of a single market for all of Europe and the creation of one political organization that encompasses almost all of the countries found between the Atlantic and the borders of Russia and the Ukraine. Enlargement implies not only the prospect of an economically stronger but also a more politically united Europe after a half century of divisions and conflict imposed by the logic of the “cold war”. Enlargement also favours the prospect of increased relations between Europe and its neighbours to the East and to the southern Mediterranean countries. With the further incorporation of Romania and Bulgaria expected to take place in 2007 and the opening up of negotiations for membership with Turkey, the European Union will expand into the most western part of Asia and extend its horizon into the frontiers of the Islamic world. The future of the European Union is also expected to involve the Balkan states that, since the beginning of the 1990s, have witnessed some of the most intense inter-ethnic fighting seen in Europe after the Second World War. Croatia is expected to begin negotiations to enter the EU in March 2005.

Enlargement is not to be considered a Utopia. Instead, it is the realization of a hardnosed approach to numerous economic, political and institutional challenges. A long round of meetings of the European Council, starting in Copenhagen in 1993 and ending, once again, in Copenhagen in 2002 identified the candidate countries and outlined the conditions...
for their entry into the EU. After three years of negotiations the December 2002 European Council was in a position to take the decision to provide for the formal entry of ten new member states. For the first time, the number of new members went beyond the previous maximum of three, thus making this the biggest enlargement of the EU ever undertaken. In addition, all of the countries considered for membership were underdeveloped from an economic perspective when compared to the previous group of member states, thus making this one of the most complex enlargements ever undertaken.3

As in the past, the Commission has had the responsibility of monitoring the ability of the candidate countries to adopt the acquis communautaire (i.e., the rules and procedures operating in the member states in their relations with the EU and in the conduct of internal policy-making and implementation) and informing the Council and Parliament once this goal has been achieved. The verification process was concluded by the Copenhagen summit in December 2002 when the Commission announced that accession could proceed. Formally, the acquis covered all of the institutional and legal reforms that needed to be incorporated by the candidate states so that the standards and procedures regulating decision-making and policy implementation within the candidate states were in line with those shared by the other fifteen member states. There was also a financial and economic acquis regulating the state of public finance and economic performance. The candidate countries were evaluated to verify their ability to participate in Europe’s competitive market system and, if necessary, to qualify for participation in European Monetary Union.

This chapter outlines the experience undergone by the new member states in meeting the criteria for membership. Particular attention will be paid to the compliance of the new member states with the acquis in one policy area – i.e., cohesion policy – that has had ramifications for a variety of institutions and policy sectors (e.g., financial and budgetary provisions, financial control, agriculture, transport, social policy and the environment). The compliance of the candidate countries with the cohesion policy acquis effectively measured the ability of these states to engage in the type of multi-level and multi-actor governance that characterizes cohesion policy and the other territorialized policy area (i.e., rural development) within the European Union.

The cohesion policy acquis consisted not only of formal compliance with the rules and regulations applied to the carrying out of the decision-making and implementation phases of the policy but also to the creation of the structures necessary for an efficient and effective policy process. Where the candidate state structures were lacking, the Commission undertook through the PHARE programme4 to finance national initiatives in “institution building” – i.e., creation of planning and management authorities – where these institutions did not exist, and to increase “institutional capacity” where the