The Case of the Eastern Frontier of the European Union

The eastern frontier is mobile, a characteristic which distinguishes it from the other EU frontiers.¹ The October 1990 unification of Germany resulted in a new EU border with Poland. The accession of Finland and Austria in 1995 established an EU external border with Russia and Hungary. Association agreements in the 1990s with all Central and Eastern European states between the EU and the former USSR were the first step towards further enlargement, which will, in the new millennium, move the external frontier further east. Schengen frontier controls have already been exported to the first tier of applicant states, requiring of them a policing role on behalf of the EU at their own eastern frontiers.

The 1990s have thus seen the transformation of a rigid boundary line between east and west – the Iron Curtain – into a more diffuse frontier zone, which includes ‘a certain de-localisation … of European frontier controls’ (M. Anderson 2000a: 23). By contrast with Turner’s conception of the American frontier (also a moving zone), expansion of the EU is the enlargement of a union of states; it is not the spread of a people or a ‘civilisation’ across a continent. The EU expansion may diffuse certain norms, values and practices, but it leaves many others in place.

This chapter charts the recent developments at the present eastern frontier of the EU since the changes of 1989–91. It then assesses the risks and opportunities concerning this frontier: the main themes are security, migration, cross-border crime and cross-border co-operation.

Enlargement: setting the scene

Much high-flown rhetoric surrounded the 1989 destruction of the Berlin Wall and the 1991 disintegration of the USSR. These pivotal
events provided the opportunity of overcoming the Cold War division of Europe and, of building, in Gorbachev’s words, a ‘common European house’. For the former satellites of the Soviet Union, and some of the republics of the former USSR, ‘now that the blocs had been dissolved without resort to violence, it became possible for them to contemplate “a return to Europe”’ (Croft et al. 1999: 6). What this meant was the adoption of certain principles – liberal constitutions, free elections, rule of law and market economies.

Almost a decade elapsed before the EU opened accession negotiations with five former Eastern bloc countries (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland), plus Slovenia and Cyprus (Map 6.1). The Polish Foreign Minister Bronislaw Geremek declared that this marked the true end of the Second World War. The entry date for new members, initially thought before the end of the millennium, was postponed; at the time of writing, the first new entries are expected around 2004. NATO membership proceeded more quickly, with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary joining on 1 April 1999, but further expansion of membership is now stalled.

Two main reasons account for the slow progress: first, changes happening contemporaneously in the West and in the East were not in harmony, and, second, fears were provoked by the prospect of open frontiers and by vague security concerns. At the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, Western Europe was in a dynamic phase of integration, following the 1986 Single European Act, the completion of the Single Market through the 1992 programme, the 1985 Schengen Agreement and the 1990 Schengen Implementation Conventions. Contemporaneously with these changes, the East Central European countries were struggling with the transformation to a market economy, establishment of democratic institutions, and rebuilding of their legal and bureaucratic systems.

The EU was alleged, by friends of East Central Europe, to be preoccupied with internal affairs, such as the common currency (Ash 1999). However, the resources made available by the EU were substantial. Between 1995 and 1999, EU subsidies for Central and Eastern European states amounted to 6.7 billion ECU, with most of it going to the three countries favoured for early entry: Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. ‘Hungary, with a per capita income four times that of Macedonia, got 12 times as much aid’ (P. Anderson 1999). The Mediterranean countries argued that concentration on East Central Europe prevented funds being directed to much poorer countries in the south. The economic aid policy of the EU may also have been aimed