

EU Enlargement – the beginning of the end

A decade or so, the EU was still settling down after having just recently absorbed ten nations into the EU. Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, but there was a widespread feeling that after that, it was time for a substantial pause for breath. “Enlargement fatigue” was setting in and an article in the Irish Times written only last December suggests that it hasn’t gone away. In the nine years since Romania and Bulgaria became members of the EU, only Croatia has joined up and there isn’t much sign of any other country following suit any time soon.

Iceland did flirt with EU membership in the years following the collapse of the country’s banks but once the dust settled, the danger posed by the Common Fisheries Policy to the country’s fishing industry caused accession talks to be abandoned in 2014.

In a sense, this came as no surprise. It is hard to imagine the remaining non-EU Western European nations ever joining now. What do wealthy countries like Norway or Switzerland have to gain? Nothing whatsoever. It’s a different case with the former Marxist régimes of Central and Eastern Europe, however, where the attraction of EU money and the desire to make a statement showing they now identify with the West have been factors in the decision of these countries to join.

Now, significantly, there are signs that enthusiasm is beginning to flag in at least one of the remaining applicant countries. An article in the *In Serbia* on-line news service suggests that this country, which shares the Eastern Orthodox faith with Russia, is more interesting in strengthening its ties with its historic ally than in joining the EU.

Recent surveys asking purely about EU membership have found support levels currently standing at about 47%. If, however, voters are given the choice of joining the EU or closer ties with Russia, the latter receives 20% more support than the EU.

Euroscepticism is on the rise. According to Djordje Vukadinovic, the editor in chief of the independent Serbian politics magazine *New Serbian Political Thought*, support for EU membership is falling and quite soft. “When we talk about those who support the European Union, this is a broad but fragile group. Eurosceptics on the other hand are much more implacable – much firmer in their convictions. Of the 45% of respondents who support the EU, only about half of them can boast such firm convictions.”

In one sense, the decision of whether or not to join the European Union is a decision for the Serbian people and of little relevance to our battle to leave the EU. Nevertheless, any significant decline in support for membership in a country where accession was hitherto regarded as a case of “when” rather than “if” cannot, if it continues, but be a further blow to the confidence to Europe’s élite. It also provides further evidence, which we can use on the campaign trail, that a desire not to be in the EU is not a phenomenon merely confined to a handful of eccentric Brits.

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