



Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Record of interview with Dr Julie Smith, University of Cambridge. 25 June 2014, and further written submission of evidence. 4 August 2014

A Foreign Office official interviewed Dr Julie Smith, Director of the European Centre and Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the Department of Politics and International Studies, Cambridge University, on 25th June 2014, for the UK Balance of Competences Review of EU Enlargement. This report covers her oral responses plus additional written evidence submitted on 4th August 2014.

By way of introduction, it is worth remembering that the European Commission has referred to enlargement as the EU's most successful tool of foreign policy. Yet it is a policy that also has profound consequences for the EU institutions: a successful enlargement policy does not only affect the candidate states; it affects the EU itself. If managed well, enlargement can lead to a positive-sum game, as Germany has long realised. Managed badly it can damage the interests of all, weakening the very process and institutions that would-be members aspire to join and from which existing Member States benefit. Member States would be well-advised to recall this when considering calls for further enlargement.

Impact on the national interest

Question 1 - Whether enlargement had impacted for the good of UK interests depends on how you define UK interests. If your key criterion is a larger market, as traditionally it has been for the UK, enlargement has indeed reaped dividends. Freedom of Movement, however, has enabled legitimate concerns to surface about the impact on society. Freedom of Movement is one of the four freedoms that the UK signed up to, but more could have been done to explain the concept to citizens, who often feel frustrated by things which appear to have been imposed from outside, from 'Brussels', even if decisions had actually been made by British politicians in the Council of Ministers/European Council, a fact that few of them seem keen to acknowledge in public.

One point in response to the background paper associated with this review: page 10 notes the UK's traditional approach to enlargement and asserts its influence as a supporter of

enlargement. This is correct, but only up to a point. The UK has been a keen advocate of enlargement but it is less clear how much influence it has gained as a result. One should neither ignore the importance of cooperation and coordination within the EU nor forget the importance of reliability and reciprocity without which initial cheerleading for enlargement will not lead to effective long-term relationships with other MS and hence to influence. As noted below, the arguably UK squandered the bilateral relations it had begun to build up ahead of the 2004 'big bang' enlargement, and thus failed to capitalise on (some of) the possible benefits from enlargement.

On balance, enlargement has been a good thing for the UK. But will it remain so? As the EU expands, more institutional complexity arises, the influence and impact of each individual Member State typically diminishes, and decision-making slows down. If the UK had built up allies to give it sufficient support in the 28, this would be fine. But we have not done so yet. As one UK ambassador put it to me after EFTA enlargement, having 12 Member States is like a dinner party, where it was reasonably possible to talk to all one's fellow diners; at 15 (and still less as 28) no such whole-table conversations are possible and it is thus far harder to get to know one's fellow diners/members. Hence it is important to build up bilateral relations outside formal EU meetings, precisely to develop a sense of where support or opposition is likely to come from on particular issues (including over enlargement itself).

Question 3 - the ability of states to veto accession means that individual states can exercise significant control over the enlargement process, at least in the negative sense of preventing would-be members from acceding to the Union. By contrast, no state can unilaterally secure enlargement – they do, in one way or another, need to get all 27 other members on board. Greece demonstrated the impact that even a relatively small state can have in blocking accession progress, and the leverage it can wield in terms of securing the entry of the Republic of Cyprus in 2004 by dint of threatening to veto Polish accession which other states, notably Germany and the UK, wanted. (Indeed, it could be argued that Greece did manage to achieve the unusual feat of securing membership for a state it supported.)

Given the 'sui generis' nature of enlargement, and the sheer number of member states, it might be hard to coalesce support behind enlargement, particularly for Turkey's progression. Given the UK's traditional support for enlargement, this is one area, perhaps, where less stringent decision-making rules might be desirable: Majority Voting for decisions on enlargement could be in the UK interest.

As noted above, the UK has failed to build on alliances with former accession countries. It worked particularly well to influence the enlargement process at the time of the “Big Bang” 2004 accession. When Keith Vaz was Europe Minister, in particular, the UK worked actively with Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and was a vocal proponent of enlargement. Those countries, and to a lesser extent the Baltic States, however, felt let down that UK’s close relationship with them through membership negotiations had not continued post-accession. These countries had lined up with the UK on issues of key importance to the UK – for instance its rebate - but now decided they could not really rely on the UK in the EU. As a result, the UK can be seen to have squandered allies, probably from a combination of complacency and arrogance, according to academics and diplomats I have spoken to over the years.

Bilateral relations with individual EU member states matter. These were a priority between 1998 and 2002-3, but became less so after Iraq. The dominant party in the current coalition government, namely the Conservatives, only seemed keen on one bilateral relationship in Europe: with Germany. The result was UK isolation on issues of real importance. Poland could have been an obvious ally of the UK: Atlanticist, NATO-oriented, neo-liberal in economics, and keen to have an activist foreign policy. But now Poland works far more with Germany and France in the framework of the Weimar Triangle, which was not the case immediately after accession. This stems more from UK political than diplomatic failure. Moreover, the Conservative’s withdrawal from the EPP had also reduced scope for UK influence, particularly ahead of summits, as seen in the debacle over what became the Fiscal Compact Treaty and the nomination of Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission President.

Exercise of competence

Questions 4 & 5 – technically the enlargement process has been run well, and the lessons of previous enlargements have been learnt, as shown in the adoption in 1993 of the Copenhagen criteria and subsequent reforms to the processes leading to accession. Yet, the presence of formal rules says little about how they are implemented in practice. Moves to ensure that candidate states meet a required set of criteria before accession are important but they do not always go far enough prior to accession, e.g. there were concerns that Bulgaria, which joined in 2007, had not made sufficient progress in some areas. Further, the criteria do not necessarily prevent post-accession back-sliding. More post-accession monitoring would thus be welcome. (It must be recalled, however, that there are similar

concerns about long-standing members not necessarily living up to the high standards demanded of candidate states.)

Some aspiring member states, notably Balcerowicz in Poland in the 1990s, used the need to meet the Copenhagen criteria as a way of justifying difficult policies to Polish voters that he would anyway have wished to implement. This runs the danger of scapegoating the EU in order not to harm domestic attitudes towards the government. This remained a risk with accession countries, as, in reality, it is for most existing member states, of course.

It is worth noting the conditionality under the European Neighbourhood Policy, seen by some as an alternative to accession for neighbours beyond the current candidate states, does not have the same traction as for candidate states, as the 'carrot' of membership is lacking. This was long an issue in the EU's relations with Ukraine, which, in contrast to the Western Balkans, was never offered a 'membership perspective'. This ensured that Ukraine's relations with the EU remained ambiguous for many years prior to the current problems in East Ukraine, as Ukraine's leaders vacillated on whether they wanted to seek membership and the EU appeared to offer something less than they wanted in any case.

Future options and challenges

Questions 7 & 9 – There are questions about how far the EU can expand before it loses its sense of identity and purpose. It is unclear whether there is a critical size/tipping point beyond which enlargement will render the Union unworkable. The answers in any case are likely to depend on attitudes to the fundamental purpose of the Union. For the UK, where support is typically predicated on a pragmatic assessment of the material benefits of membership, particularly the internal market, rather than of values, enlargement is probably less of a problem than for countries such as France.

The further the Union expands the greater the diversity of interests evinced by its members, including differing socio-economic and geo-strategic interests, not to mention cultural and religious values. And, it is not just a matter of values but of the sheer complexity of decision-making, even where QMV is the rule. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, enlargement also impacts the EU in terms of its institutional dynamics and the Union's modus operandi. Thus further enlargement is likely to necessitate further institutional reforms, which will inevitably create tensions among the existing and future member states. Over the last 20 years, treaty reform has proven to be highly controversial and this problem is particularly

significant in cases where reforms are primarily linked to shifting institutional arrangements associated with enlargement, which ensure that existing states all feel they lose some power, influence and perhaps financial benefits of membership. Thus, even for the UK, further enlargement should be viewed with caution given the likely institutional upheaval it is likely to engender.

Finally, it is worth remembering that future expansion is likely to bring the boundaries of Europe closer to conflict zones. This would be true of Turkish membership, given its borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria and has recently been highlighted by the situation in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, a new neighbour since Poland's accession to the EU a decade ago. Given that a fundamental reason for the creation of the European Communities sixty years ago was to create stability and security for its members, expansion to regions that ensure instability on Europe's borders need to be considered very carefully indeed. The EU may not have the equivalent of the Article 5 NATO guarantee, but states can be expected to show solidarity with fellow members in cases where their security is under threat. In the case of most candidate or potential candidate states, further expansion would thus bring greater insecurity rather than enhance security for existing member states including the UK.

Question 8 - The EU needs to be clearer in its messaging to enlargement countries. With Turkey, communication has been ambiguous, by turns inflating and frustrating Turkish expectations on which the EU, collectively, has never been willing to deliver. The recent Croatian case has also shown that the EU should rethink time projections for accession negotiations, as 10 years was beyond the electoral life, and certainly the perspective, of so many Prime Ministers, who needed short-term electoral platforms.