



Foreign & Commonwealth Office

Note of Enlargement Session with SEEG, 14 July 2014

The Balance of Competences (BOC) Enlargement team summarised the themes that have emerged from the evidence submitted and highlighted areas in which the Senior European Experts Group's (SEEG) thoughts would be welcome. It also requested further feedback on the SEEG's evidence.

The SEEG began by outlining a general position on Enlargement. It was felt that this policy had been outstanding – it was the EU's most successful foreign policy and single greatest source of stability in the western Balkans. The comparison between “shock and awe” in Iraq and EU Enlargement highlights how uniquely strong the EU's approach has been in transforming its neighbourhood.

The first topic raised by the Balance of Competence Team was the interplay between Member States and the European Commission in the accession process. The Commission wields significant informal power through its contributions to the technical and substantial aspects of the negotiations and the BOC team wanted to know whether the SEEG thinks the Commission needs a tighter mandate.

The SEEG felt that the competence between Member States and the EU institutions is in the right place – enlargement had little to do with balance of competences. The growth of English as the lingua franca in Brussels was a double edged sword – it also contributed to the decline in UK staffing in the institutions. EU assistance to aspirant countries, for example PHARE and CARDS had been astonishingly successful.

One participant stated that there could be more oversight of the Commission because, left to its own devices, it can move aspirant countries quickly down the road to accession without Member States really noticing. Another participant expressed the view that that the introduction of the ‘New Approach’ has improved the process significantly, as it provides more effective control over aspirant states and ensures deeper implementation. This was seen as fundamental because once negotiations close the EU and Member States lose their leverage. Attempts could be made to encourage conditionality post-accession, but– as the

case of Cyprus had shown, for example – the accession itself sometimes made this more difficult. Once admitted to the EU, a new Member State was in a stronger position to block or postpone the changes being urged upon it. It could also prove problematic for existing Member States who may not meet the necessary criteria. There was a danger in future, however, of a two tier western Balkans as some countries progressed and some did not. The SEEG was asked to further develop its thoughts on transitional controls, which in its evidence it said should be 'better harmonised' at the EU level in the future.

Some members of the SEEG argued that there might be conditionality associated with transitional controls, so that it is not simply a case of waiting for a set time period to pass. Others were more cautious, for fear that a post-transition regime might derogate from the principle of the Free Movement of People. This would be the case, for example, with GDP thresholds. On the other hand, aspirant states would probably accept longer transitional periods. For receiving countries like the UK, targeted social measures for specific towns and communities affected by free movement were the best way to address pressures, together with further internal welfare reform, consistent with the principle of Free movement, to reduce the (largely illusory) threat of benefit tourism.

The SEEG Group was asked for its views on the perception that conditionality is becoming stricter and longer, and that consequently aspirant states may decide not to persevere with their accession ambitions.

One member of the SEEG posited that they believed this would not transpire as many of the current aspirant states have no alternative. They pointed to those countries that have suspended or quit the accession process, such as Norway and Iceland, arguing that they did so because they were asked to join too fast, not because the process was moving too slowly and they had strong alternatives. When Turkey was mentioned as a possible exception the participant refuted the assertion, pointing to developments in Turkey which show continuing aspiration for EU membership. PM Erdogan has made the accession process one of his top priorities in the current election campaign. Being part of the process served Turkey's interests even if the prospect of accession remained distant (even, indeed, if it might never actually happen). Accession would be its preference, but in the absence of that it would prefer to maintain the process. As for the possibility of being an EU member, without really being a member, i.e. something slightly less than full membership, the SEEG argued that it is not possible, likening the search for such an arrangement to the quest for the Philosopher's Stone. It was what Delors had sought for the countries of Central and Eastern

Europe (hoping they might be satisfied with some sort of 'EEA plus') – but it quickly became clear that nothing short of full membership would be possible.

On the economic impact on the UK following the accession of other states, the SEEG felt that there has been an economic benefit but that it is difficult to find an appropriate metric to measure it. Other evidence submitted to the team has pointed to a growth in exports following accession but such a measure is limited as there are economic benefits that accrue from enlargement that are not represented by export figures. Economic benefits for the UK go much wider than exports – for example the contribution of skilled staff to public services. It was also argued that the bedrock of the case for further enlargement of the EU is not one founded in the economic benefits, but in the impact on peace, security and stability.