

Today's European Union is 27 states in search of a story

The silent empire has expanded again. There is so much to celebrate - but why do we see so little celebration?

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On New Year's Day, the silent empire expanded again. Its new colonies celebrated their incorporation as a liberation - which, for most individual Romanians and Bulgarians, it will be. Twenty years ago, they were the impoverished subjects of dictatorships. (Remember Nicolae Ceausescu and his Securitate secret police?) Now they are citizens of the largest, most integrated community of liberal democracies in the world. For all the corruption, unemployment and other discontents of their current, very imperfect democracies, that is progress. Meanwhile, countries around the empire's edge queue up crying: "Take us in, please!" Of what other empire in history has that been true? For the silent empire is also a voluntary empire, a commonwealth of consent.

As it grows to 27 countries, the European Union is the most successful example of peaceful regime change in our time. More than half its member states were dictatorships well within living memory. Their advance towards liberal democracy has gone hand in hand with their advance towards membership of what is now the European Union. In every corner of the continent most people are better off and more free than they were half a century ago.

Fifty years ago this March, at the height of the cold war, six western European states established a European Economic Community by signing what came to be known as the Treaty of Rome. If you had told any of the signatories back in 1957 that in 2007 Europe would look as it does today, they would probably have dismissed you as a demented dreamer. And were Konrad Adenauer or Paul-Henri Spaak with us today, they would be saying: so you must be going to have a great celebration this March 25.

Which, ostensibly, we are. Since Germany holds the rotating presidency of the EU for the first half of this year, there will be a party in Berlin - perhaps in a part of the city that was under Soviet occupation in 1957 - and a "Berlin declaration" to mark the anniversary. Yet everyone knows that, beneath the surface, political Europe is not in party mood about itself. The community is morose, ill-tempered and uncertain of its future direction. Individually, most Europeans live better than before, but collectively they don't feel good about their voluntary empire. Rarely has such a successful enterprise been so plagued with self-doubt.

Partly these doubts are a result of its very success. Enlargement is the historic triumph of the EU, but enlargement means change and change is always disruptive. Long-term, overall, it

will increase our prosperity, but short-term it can mean - or be seen to mean - east European migrants taking local jobs and burdening local services. Hence the backlash against the "Polish plumber" in France, and the regrettable restrictions on Romanians and Bulgarians coming to work in Britain. Institutional arrangements originally designed for six member states, and still just about functional with 15, become cumbersome with 27 - but the proposed constitutional treaty has been rejected in France and the Netherlands, partly in reaction to the perceived consequences of enlargement. Turkey's candidacy raises fears of a loss of cultural coherence. The issues of immigration, crime, terrorism and the integration of Muslims into European societies get stirred up together by the gutter press and populist politicians.

The enlargement challenge comes at a time when low-cost competition from the emerging economic giants of Asia is bearing down on sluggish European economies. The economically more advanced, broadly speaking social democratic societies of western and northern Europe, have grown accustomed to a historically unusual combination of steady growth in personal spending power and high levels of state-guaranteed welfare. With ageing populations and the competition from Asia, this is difficult to sustain. Then there is the double imperative of securing our energy supplies, currently dependent on authoritarian regimes in Russia, central Asia and the Middle East, and doing more to slow down global warming by reducing our carbon dioxide emissions.

These are real problems, and all we can realistically hope from the six-month German presidency is that it begins to generate a new sense that Europe is capable of finding practical solutions to them. The implementation will have to follow under the Portuguese and, yes, Slovenian presidencies of the EU, and the proposed solutions will need to win the active support of a new French president and Gordon Brown.

Yet beyond the individual policies, there is the matter of the overall story that Europe wants to tell. Everything that the European community did from the late 50s to the early 90s was packaged within a larger historical narrative. Of course individual nations had their own different narratives about their place in Europe and Europe's place in them, but there was sufficient common ground among two generations of political leaders shaped by the memory of war. No longer. An effective political narrative links a (selective) history of where we are coming from with an inspiring vision of where we are heading to. This is what Europe now lacks.

For the 50th anniversary celebrations we have a logo, designed by a Polish student. In a jumble of letters using typescripts and accents from different European countries it says "Tögethé® since 1957". Very sweet, but already there have been objections that the word "together" is English as opposed to, say, French; the jumbled design is itself the opposite of together; and anyway, as every Pole should know, we have not been together - or even tögethé® - since 1957, when Poland, along with half of Europe, was still behind the iron curtain. In fact, the 27 of us have only been together since 2007. So, back to the drawing board. The Italian author Luigi Pirandello wrote a play memorably entitled *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The European Union today is 27 states in search of a story.