Reforming deep before enlarging wide?

By Anand Menon and R. Daniel Kelemen

The European Union, it would seem, has had its fill of enlargement. Not content with pouring cold water on Turkish aspirations for early membership, the European Commission dashed Croatia’s hope to accede in time to participate in the 2009 European Parliament elections.

The decisions were largely attributable to the ascendant view that the Union, like a soggy sheet of kitchen towel, has reached its ‘absorption capacity’. Institutional reform - deepening - it is claimed, must precede further enlargement, or widening. The widening-deepening link is deployed tactically by all those with an axe to grind about enlargement and is used in fundamentally contradictory ways. For some, enlargement represents the route to a union too large and cumbersome to be anything more than a free-trade area. For others, widening is a means to kick-start deepening. Currently, it is enlargement sceptics who dominate the debate.

It has become a truism in EU circles that the Union needs institutional reform to cope with an influx of new members. The difficulty of agreeing on this any time soon is proving convenient to those who shy away from openly opposing enlargement. It is more acceptable, after all, to demand a pause in enlargement for the sake of the Union’s effectiveness, than to voice opposition to the idea of Turkish membership per se. The notion that widening necessarily impedes deepening reflects the intuitively appealing assumption that the larger the Union, the harder it becomes for its members to agree on anything. Yet this is belied by the EU’s own history. Many initiatives that were rejected or proved abortive in a Community of Six - notably monetary union and the security dimension of European integration - have become accepted elements of a larger Union.

Nor has the EU25 ground to a halt. Quite the contrary. It continues to legislate on everything from financial services to environmental protection, and recently achieved a compromise on the controversial services directive. Member states have even approved measures to strengthen EU powers in the sensitive areas of counter-terrorism and policing.

The experience of other political systems also contradicts the claim that more states means a less effective centre. The US (with 50 states) has a hugely powerful federal government, while Australia (with six states and two territories) and Belgium (with three regions) have weak centres. The US, moreover, both widened and deepened over time, enlarging from 13 to 50 states while experiencing a dramatic growth in its federal power. Widening evidently risks straining a political system. But, as the US experience shows, increasing the number of states can in practice strengthen the centre by - necessarily - diluting the veto power of individual states.

We are not claiming that such comparisons will provide neat answers. And we are certainly not arguing that the EU can sustain an ever larger union. Our point is that issues related to enlargement are too often addressed on the basis of prejudice and conjecture, rather than well-grounded analysis.

The real obstacle to further enlargement is not the inability of the Union to cope. It is the palpable and increasingly vocal resistance of public opinion in several member states. Enlargement fatigue, not absorption capacity, is the name of the game. Disguising this domestic obstacle as a problem of dysfunctional EU institutions is likely to result in the EU undertaking untested and potentially rash reforms to solve an imaginary problem. Instead, what is needed, and long overdue, is a proper public debate on enlargement, to discover precisely how much widening voters want or will accept.

*Anand Menon is professor of European politics, University of Birmingham. R. Daniel Kelemen is fellow in politics, Lincoln College, Oxford University.*

© Copyright 2006 The Economist Newspaper Limited. All rights reserved.