

# DIPLO Development Summaries 4

## The Return to Europe: The Eighteenth Anniversary of the European Union's First Eastern Enlargement

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*As the eighteenth anniversary of the EU's 'big bang' enlargement approaches, DIPLO's Mathew Doidge reflects on its achievements.*

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### **Russian Guns and the Call of Europe**

On 28 February 2022, as the weight of Russian military might was being brought to bear upon it, Ukraine applied to join the European Union (EU). While the Russian invasion provided the immediate pre-text, membership had been on the Ukrainian political agenda since 2005 when, only two days after his election, then President Viktor Yushchenko declared it to be a [strategic aim](#). Current President Volodymyr Zelensky's request to the EU, under the shadow of Russian tanks, was a symbolic act: it was a claim for Ukraine's European identity to be recognised, and it was a turning away from Russia and towards the West. It also recognised the symbolic value of the European Union itself, as a representation of a set of values and ideals which Ukraine claimed to share, and which stand in contrast to those of the regime of Vladimir Putin. In seeking EU membership, Zelensky sought to set Ukraine on a path trodden by eight Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) almost two decades earlier, and by other former Eastern bloc states since.

1 May 2022 is the eighteenth anniversary of the 'big bang' enlargement of the European Union, in which eight post-communist Central and Eastern European countries, alongside Cyprus and Malta, were welcomed into the Union. The 2004 enlargement, and the stabilisation and transformation of the eight eastern states that it entailed, constitutes one of the most significant successes of European integration, the underlying intention of which has been, since the outset, contributing to peace and stability on the European continent, and preventing a return to the competition and conflict that had produced two World Wars in less than three decades. With this anniversary approaching, and with the events just outside the borders of the EU in mind, it is worth pausing to reflect on this process.

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### **The Collapse of Communism and the Uncertainty of Transition**

When the Iron Curtain came down during 1989–1990, an air of celebration spread across Europe. For the Eastern European states, the physical barrier that had denied them their

European identity and heritage was now gone, allowing, in the words of Václav Havel (former President of Czechoslovakia and subsequently Czechia), [“the realistic hope that together we can return to Europe as free, independent and democratic nations”](#). For the Eastern European states, this idea of a return to Europe carried great resonance. Nevertheless, as the elation following the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that it symbolised began to subside, the challenges of such a process became clear.

Tentative transitions toward democracy and market economics were taking place in the Central and Eastern European countries, but the increasingly severe economic hardship experienced as a consequence was, by the early 1990s, also making itself felt. As Lech Wałęsa (co-founder of Solidarity and the first popularly elected President of Poland) famously commented of the transition from capitalism to communism and back again: [“It is easy to make fish soup from the aquarium with living gold-fish, but just imagine what challenge it is to try to make the aquarium with living goldfish out of the fish-soup”](#). The economic consequences of the neoliberal economic transformation for domestic publics in the form of increased unemployment, frozen wages, ever-increasing living costs and the unaffordability of core services, led to real concerns that public support for the broader reform process, including for democratisation, would waiver. This, in turn, would risk instability and conflict on a wider scale.

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## **The Return to Europe**

With increasing uncertainty surrounding the post-communist future of the Central and Eastern European countries, there was a real interest among Western states, and chief among them those of Western Europe, in supporting the transition process as a means for promoting peace and stability on the continent. The need for significant aid transfers was recognised, with a range of frameworks discussed (including the possibility of a Marshall Plan for Eastern Europe) to structure political and economic relations, and support ongoing democratisation and marketisation. But such arms-length solutions, with the eastern states seen as external partners to the EU, soon fell by the wayside under ongoing pressure from those states for the Union to fulfil the promise of membership that dated back to the founding of European integration: membership, according to the 1957 Treaty of Rome, was open all European states. For the Central and Eastern European states, the symbolic attraction of the European Union was immense, with accession to the organisation providing practical expression to the aspiration expressed by Havel and others for a return to Europe. This was an aspiration from which they would not resile. And, indeed, several EU Member States supported accession, with Germany, for example, expressing a sense of moral obligation to welcome the eastern states into the Union, stemming from its actions during the Second World War.

The result, at the European Council meeting of EU Heads of State and Government in 1993 was a firm commitment to accession, and the adoption of a set of membership criteria which would shape and frame the transition process of the CEECs. From that point forward, the enlargement process served as the primary tool through which principles of democracy, the rule of law and free market economics were established in the post-communist states, the framework through which convergence with their western European partners was fostered, and the mechanism through which peace and stability were pursued.

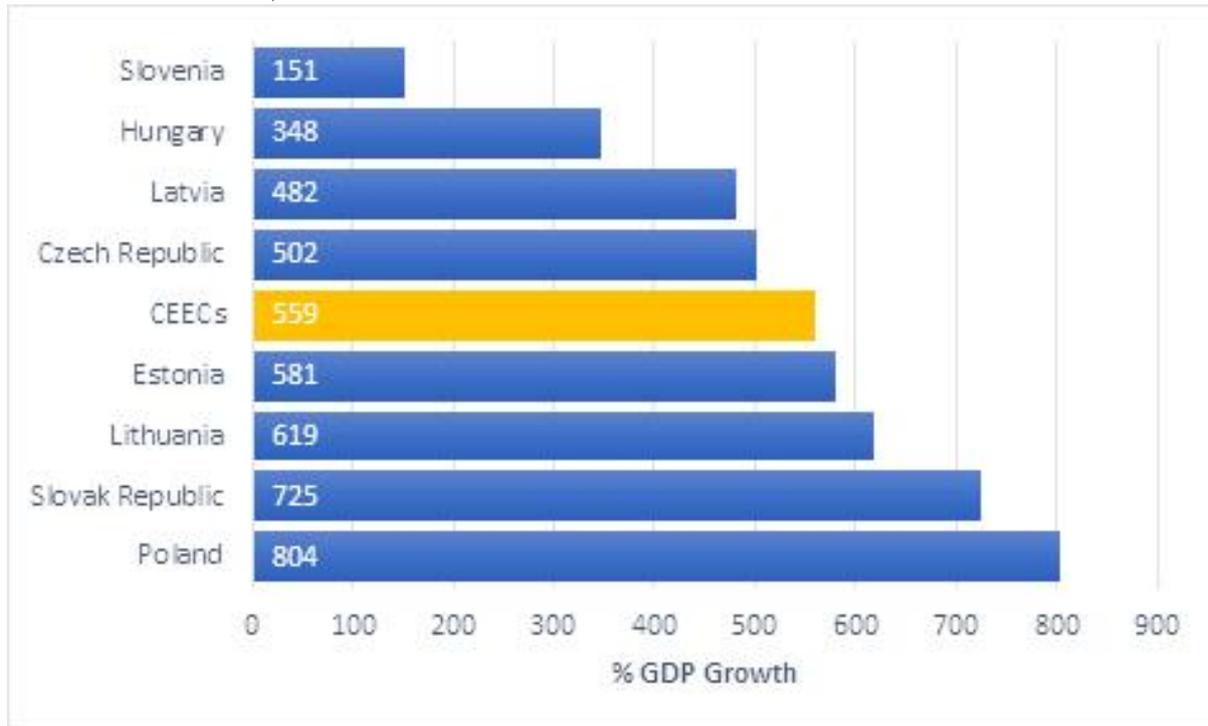
This was a significant commitment on the part of the European Union. The incorporation of these new members would, for example, require addressing changes to the way that the Union itself operated. The institutional structure within which the EU's members engage involves a delicate balance between the states, the careful renegotiation of which was necessitated by eastern enlargement. Further, the eastern states were universally poorer, and more agricultural, with implications for Union spending. Between 1990 and 2003 (the year before they joined the EU), the eight CEECs received more than €16 billion in direct financial transfers as pre-accession support for domestic institution building, infrastructure projects, and agricultural and rural development, with [over €9 billion of that coming in the four years immediately prior to accession](#). This financial support increased significantly following membership as the new Member States became eligible for a range of funding instruments designed to reduce regional disparities within the European Union: between 2007 and 2020, the eight Central and Eastern European states received more than €211 billion in support. The extent of the commitment of the European Union to enlargement to the east cannot, therefore, be underestimated.

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## **Stabilisation and Transformation**

In the almost three decades since the decision of the Copenhagen European Council, and in the 18 years since their accession, the CEECs have undergone a process of significant convergence with their western counterparts, a process which has led from the uncertainty of the immediate post-Cold War period to the stability that exists within the Union's borders today. In economic terms, sustained growth has seen the eastern economies collectively expand almost sixfold since 1990 (with Poland's economy growing by more than 800 per cent), which has had broader socio-economic outcomes. Life expectancy at birth in the eight CEECs, for example, was between 5 and 8 years greater in 2019 compared to 1990 (with Slovenia seeing the most significant increase), while infant mortality has on average declined from almost 13 per 1000 live births to fewer than 3.

CEEC % GDP Growth, 1990-2020



Source: World Bank. World Development Indicators Database.

Politically, the process of democratisation was largely consolidated and stabilised, notwithstanding recent [backsliding in states such as Poland and Hungary](#). The aspiration for membership helped structure the democratic choices made by the CEECs, with it being notable that systems of parliamentary democracy were pursued, rather than the presidential structures concentrating power in the hands of individuals as was favoured by other Eastern bloc states such as Belarus, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. And while the transition to full democracy is yet to be completed by any of the eight CEECs – all were listed in the 2021 Democracy Index, for example as ‘Flawed Democracies’ (as was the United States) – by comparison to other states in the wider Central and Eastern European region, they have performed well: in 2021, the CEECs occupied the top 7 positions in the Democracy Index ranking for the region (with Hungary 10<sup>th</sup>), out of 28 states. The remaining three positions in the top 11 of the ranking are filled by other eastern Member States of the EU that have joined since 2004.

Beyond the consolidation and stabilisation of democratic transformation, membership in the European Union has served an important role in cementing democracy in place as a baseline expectation against which those states may be held to account by the other Member States of the European Union and, more importantly, by their own domestic publics. In this respect, for these states, democracy has become the ‘new normal’ against which backsliding may be measured and efforts made to counter it. Moves to address events in Poland and Hungary are to be seen in this context.

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## Symbolic Value and Practical Impact

The European Union's symbolic attraction, representing a set of values and ideals (including democracy, human rights and the rule of law), and its perceived identity as a region of peace, prosperity and stability have made it a major pole of attraction for the states of the former eastern bloc. This pull has arguably been made stronger by the successful integration of the eight CEECs that were welcomed into the European family with the Union's first eastern enlargement on 1 May 2004. Almost two decades later, that is a path that has now been followed by three further eastern states – Bulgaria and Romania (in 2007) and Croatia (in 2013) – with five more at various stages along the road (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and three submitting or intending to submit applications (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). That the European Union has been able to operationalise this attraction to contribute to the (albeit imperfect) consolidation of democracy and economic transformation in eastern Europe, and in so doing to build towards the organisation's underlying goal of achieving peace and stability, cannot be ignored. Indeed, reflecting back on the events of 1939–1945 that gave rise to European integration, and noting the ongoing conflicts that have made themselves so strongly evident just outside the Union's borders over the last 18 years – be they in the Balkans, the Caucasus, or now Ukraine – this contribution to peaceful transformation, recognising the aspirations of the people of Eastern Europe, should be celebrated, including in New Zealand.