

Europe

OPEN THE DOORS



HERE WE COME:
A cowherd and
his animals near
a closed Bulgarian
chemical plant

The European Union will soon admit Bulgaria and Romania. Will that be the end of enlargement? Not at all. Hello, Albania! BY ANDREW MORAVCSIK

RIOTS IN HUNGARY? RISING ANTI-Europe sentiment across Eastern Europe? A resounding “no” to a new constitution in France and the Netherlands, and similar sentiment elsewhere? Never mind. Time for the next round.

This week the European Union will decide when and under what conditions to admit Romania and Bulgaria into that most exclusive club. Governments are almost certain to go along. The odds are that, come New Year’s 2007, Europe will thus be that much bigger.

Welcome to the neighborhood? Not quite. Pundits and publics remain deeply skeptical. Critics insist neither country is ready for admission. In these increasingly anti-foreigner times, some hint that they do not really belong—that they’re more Balkan than European. Almost everyone is certain about one thing: Europe is tired of adding new members. Enlargement is opposed by nearly two thirds of Germans and French, and almost half of Swedes, Italians and Brits. Last year’s ill-fated French and Dutch referendums had little to do with the content of the European constitution, but a lot to do with growing popular resistance to the hoary notion of an ever-larger union.

Experts call it “enlargement fatigue.” After bringing in 10 mostly East European newcomers two years ago, the conventional wisdom today is easily summed up: the entry of Romania and Bulgaria will represent the high-water mark of a process begun half a century ago—the progressive enlargement of “Europe.” The Union now encompasses more than 460 million people stretching from the Mediterranean to the Arctic, and has a GDP larger than the United States’. Enough is enough, most Europeans say. Time to close the doors.

That’s the CW—but it’s wrong. Far from marking the culmination of the European experiment, the latest round of enlargement is merely a curtain raiser for even more-ambitious efforts to come. Mindful of public anxiety over everything from illegal immigration to organized crime, Europe’s political leaders aren’t trumpeting this fact—but it’s true. After Romania and Bulgaria comes Croatia. Then Macedonia, followed by Serbia, Montenegro and down through Albania. Even the tiny soon-to-be new nation of Kosovo is a potential candidate. And let’s not forget that just last year, European leaders voted unanimously to open talks with Turkey. The end is not in sight.

True, the process will not be easy. Look at the challenges of integration that await in the shape of Romania and Bulgaria. They will be the poorest members of the EU, with a per capita GDP at less than a third the EU average, hardly higher than Turkey’s and below levels enjoyed under communism. University of Leuven

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Moravcsik and read
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economist Ides Nicaise foresees a future of dependency: “Bulgaria will lag behind, asking for the EU’s help and support, for a long time.” The two countries are, some charge, in no position to implement EU rules. The European Commission says they’ve passed the proper regulations, governing everything from environmental codes to food sanitation. But many suspect, as does Gergana Noutcheva of the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels, that Romania and Bulgaria are “EU-compliant on paper only. No one knows if they are really enforcing [the rules].”

Corruption and criminality are rampant in both countries. Transparency International’s corruption index ranks Bulgaria on par with Colombia. Romania lags behind such notorious locales as China, Egypt and Mexico. Networks of organized criminals trafficking in drugs, women and illicit goods riddle Bulgaria. More than 100 people have been gunned down in mafia or political killings in the past decade, in some cases in broad daylight in central Sofia. No one is sure that the legal system is strong enough to enforce the law, let alone jail crime kingpins the government is currently unable or unwilling to prosecute.

Politics in the region is increasingly unruly. Bulgaria and Romania remain on their best behavior as the EU decision looms. But in nearby Poland, the politician-twins Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski lead a government that is not just Euroskeptical but ultraconservative, even illiberal. In July, one governing party’s gay-bashing triggered a formal censure from the European Parliament. Just last week in Hungary, 150 people were injured in the worst riots since the anti-Soviet uprising of 1956 (following story).

Enlargement has been further discredited by recent waves of immigration, particularly from Poland. Before the 10 new members entered, the Commission estimated that fewer than 20,000 Poles would go west. Yet recent reports reveal some 600,000 Poles have been working in the U.K. alone—the largest single immigrant wave in British history. Western Europeans fear that further enlargement will add to this flood of illegal “Polish plumbers,” and Brussels hardly bothers to issue denials. It is left to political leaders in the two applicant countries to assuage these fears—an effort that seems increasingly absurd, as when Bulgarian Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev recently claimed that his countrymen would never leave their country because they prefer its warm weather to Northern Europe’s rainy chill.

Legal uncertainty, economic backwardness, organized crime, political intolerance and floods of immigrants. Why do it? “The EU finds itself in a trap of its own making,” says Noutcheva. European governments committed four years ago to permit Romanian and Bulgarian entry either in 2007 or 2008—and now they are stuck. “If Europe shirks its obligations,” says Noutcheva, “it would damage its reputation.” Many criticize Brussels for not maintaining the diplomatic flexibility to say no.

But things aren’t quite so simple. While in public some governments will criticize the Commission, nearly all European leaders have worked hard behind the scenes to bring about just this result. And they have every intention of continuing with enlargement. They know just what they are doing and why.

Some motivations are narrowly self-interested. In frontline

countries like Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Italy and now the 10 new members, enlargement creates particular commercial opportunities and provides a geopolitical buffer against the tumultuous post-Soviet space. In Britain and Scandinavia, widening undermines Euro-federalists who want to deepen the EU—or turn it to anti-American purposes. On the other hand, perhaps the strongest supporter of Romania and Bulgaria in recent years has been France. Some mutter darkly that President Jacques Chirac is motivated by his lingering 19th-century impulse to “balance” German influence in the Balkans. But the real reason is more enlightened: European leaders understand that peace and prosperity in the region requires enlargement.

Their calculations go beyond trade and stability to include immigration as well. Publics may fear it but leaders understand the demographic imperative: in the face of declining birthrates, their economic future depends on imported labor. Though it may seem harsh, most prefer East Europeans to the alternatives. Note, too,



NEW NEIGHBOR: To join the EU, Romania remade itself—from the bottom up

that West European states retain the legal right to block immigration, at least for the next five years. Those 600,000 Poles are in Britain today because the government chose to permit them. While the British Home Office has lately been hinting that it might impose some restrictions on immigration from Romania and Bulgaria, it's unclear how tough they will be. Significantly, Tony Blair is reported to have met secretly in recent weeks with businessmen favoring free immigration. Brendan Barber, head of the main federation of British labor, the Trades Union Congress, supports Balkan immigration as well.

Enlargement has been vital to locking in democracy and market capitalism across Europe. Romanian and Bulgarian membership comes after a decade of “conditionality”—whereby Brussels has compelled the two countries to implement tens of thousands of pages of EU law (the *acquis*, in Euro-jargon) and to improve domestic administration and adjudication, as well as fight crime and corruption. Most European governments know that social problems like criminality, as well as geopolitical instability or expanded Russian influence, could result if Balkan governments fail. In the name of this effort, politicians in every major country have shown considerable courage in overriding opposing economic interests and cultural critics.

Enlargement is also the core of what EU foreign-policy guru Robert Cooper terms Europe's “postmodern” foreign policy.

Whereas the U.S. flexes “hard power” in Iraq and Iran, the EU deploys “civilian power” in its neighborhood, influencing countries to adopt its ways by slowly admitting them to the club—with conditionality. In one country after another, potential nationalist or authoritarian parties made way for more-democratic, market-oriented politicians whose major goal was EU membership. The contrast with 15 years of civil war in the former Yugoslavia reminds us what life in the Balkans would be like without the promise of EU membership. Since the Berlin wall fell, enlargement has proved to be the most cost-effective instrument for expanding the Western economic and political practice—far more cost-effective than U.S. military intervention. As Prof. José Torreblanca at Madrid's prestigious Real Instituto Elcano puts it: “It's not just the EU's best foreign policy; it's their only foreign policy.”

The effects are visible in Romania and Bulgaria. Local politicians have an incentive to recast themselves as pro-European, anticorruption democrats. Consider the telegenic mayor of Sofia, Borisov Boyko, who was once the bodyguard of Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's last Communist strongman. Boyko has become one of the country's most popular politicians via Sofia's anti-mafia task force. He helped hunt down criminals and corrupt government officials—making sure to be there when TV cameras recorded the final arrest. Businesses have responded to reform with investment directed at the EU market, creating a large constituency for compliance with EU rules and eventual membership. As a result, both Romania and Bulgaria appear to have implemented most EU procedures—even in sensitive areas such as agriculture and energy. Commission data (too sensitive to release) and academic analyses suggest that compliance rates in the 10 new member states are in fact higher than in many older member states—not least France and Germany. No wonder Bulgarian economic growth is nearing 6 percent.

Skeptics say it's still not enough, but what is a reasonable standard of comparison? “Romania may not look like Sweden,” says one Commission official actively involved in the negotiations, who asked to remain anonymous because of his role. “But it looks a lot less like Azerbaijan, which is what it could have been without the EU's guiding influence.” Oxford scholar Jan Zielonka similarly views as unreasonable the expectation that enlargement will produce Euro-clones. He says: “The relevant standard is Greece or Berlusconi's Italy—which demonstrate that high levels of crime and corruption are not incompatible with membership.”

In this respect, it might even be said that Bulgaria and Romania are less problematic. Much of their crime, by contrast to Italy's, is transnational in nature. That is, it flows across their borders from the former Soviet Union. If European authorities are to prevail over such forces, perhaps it's better to have the Bulgarians in the EU. Many in the Commission now say the same in relation to regulatory and judicial matters, where the EU can withhold financial benefits or act through the courts and bureaucracies to promote more-rapid progress in the two countries.

The future will bring more such problems. Heather Grabbe, a close adviser to EU Enlargement Commissioner Oli Rehn, predicts: “Countries in the western Balkans will be considered one by one, on a strictly merit-based criteria. Based on the Romanian and Bulgarian experience, our demands will be more sweeping and more precise.” The whole process might take 15 years—and it will involve real political costs. Recognizing Kosovo's likely independence, with the backlash from Serbia, will be an early test. And farther down the road comes Turkey. European leaders deserve immense credit for their willingness to persevere with enlargement. But if they are to play a stabilizing role in their neighborhood, what else are they to do? Former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer, a convinced European and former leader of the Green Party, puts it bluntly: “There is no alternative.” ■