

Communicating enlargement

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Enlargement has been without doubt one of the greatest achievements of the European Union, bringing peace and prosperity to our continent.

However, what is unfortunate is that this feeling of success and jubilation is still not entirely shared by EU citizens — particularly those from old member states. The failure of the EU to effectively communicate the benefits of enlargement has resulted in the populations of many EU countries becoming negatively disposed to further enlargement.

“Communication” is a word used a lot by the EU. There is even a Commissioner for Communication. This makes it even more difficult to understand how the EU has managed to do such an inadequate job of explaining why the EU enlarged, what has been achieved and why it should continue. It is little wonder that people are nervous of the EU expanding even further when they are still grappling to understand what happened in 2004 and earlier this year when Romania and Bulgaria joined. It is not surprising, therefore, that while the floods of Eastern Europeans continue to arrive in Western Europe there is little appetite for and in some cases, even fear, over further enlargement. This has resulted in what has become commonly known as “enlargement fatigue.” How and when this fatigue will end nobody knows but the effects of this fatigue have had a clear impact. Enlargement fatigue has already had a negative effect on the accession process of Turkey and those lining up in the Western Balkans.

A good example of an incompetent communication policy is the UK’s. The UK was one of only three countries that immediately opened its labour market to workers from Eastern Europe. All other member states applied a seven-year transitional period. However, Downing Street failed miserably both to explain enlargement and prepare the country for the event. Rather they preferred to leave that task to the tabloid press. The government totally underestimated the number of people that would come to the UK.

On the May 1, 2004 a never-ending stream of buses began to arrive from Eastern Europe bringing tens of thousands of workers into the country looking for a better life. Today the numbers have passed the half-million mark with a further 20,000 workers estimated to arrive each month. Such a mass migration is unprecedented in the UK. The only event that comes close was the migration of the Huguenots from France in 1685.

Not surprisingly, this massive migration has had a big impact on the social services, particularly on the education and health systems which have found it difficult to cope. In some cases, parents feel their children’s education has been adversely affected because of the large numbers of non-English speaking children that have been injected into schools. It has also led to perceptions of Eastern Europeans taking British jobs with many people believing that the UK has reached “full-capacity” regarding migrant workers. All of this has resulted in a lot of half-truths being spread by the press and others who are anti-EU. A recent report by Migration Watch states that new figures, apparently based on the government’s own figures, reveal that the benefit to each member of the native population of the UK from immigration is worth about 4p a week — or less than the equivalent of a small Mars bar a month! This hardly reflects the economic success story that the Brussels bureaucrats talk about.

It is not surprising therefore that the UK has taken up a more cautious approach and changed its “open-door policy” and imposed restrictions on workers coming from Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the union on Jan. 1, 2007. Nevertheless, they will still come — precise figures will be released later this

year — but they will simply work undeclared, paying no taxes and in effect contributing nothing to the country due to country decisions to exclude them from the majority of sectors of the labour market.

EU citizens are told that enlargement has helped increase prosperity and competitiveness, enabling the enlarged union to respond better to the challenges of globalisation, and has increased the EU's weight in the world. These may all be very relevant facts, but they are not enough.

The truth is there are very relevant benefits to be reaped from enlargement and migration, but this needs to be explained in every-day terms that everybody can understand. Citizens need to see real evidence that they are benefiting from enlargement. If they cannot, it will be extremely difficult to justify further enlargement. In December 2006, the European Commission published a Communiqué on its Enlargement Strategy. This strategy states that "Member States need to take the lead in explaining why enlargement is in the EU's interest." Let us hope they heed this advice well !