The surgery succeeded. Has the patient died?

The impact of enlargement on the European Union

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Abstract

The recent enlargement of the European Union (EU) to 10 new states, occurred on 1 May 2004, has been surrounded – both in academic and political circles – by two contrasting discourses. The first, prior to enlargement, foresaw dramatic consequences had the expansion of the EU not been accompanied by a serious, large-scale effort to reform its institutions. The second, subsequent to enlargement, tended on the contrary to downplay these predictions: despite the little ambition of the Treaty of Nice – so the argument goes – the entry of several new members has not altered the nature of the system, if not for some minimal logistic aspects. This paper originates from a stark contradiction: whereas the enlarged EU, both in its statements and decisions, acts as if the 2004 enlargement had been a success, the grounds for this assumption seem rather fragile. A serious, retrospective assessment of enlargement has not been performed by the EU institutions; researchers who embarked on this exercise raise serious caveats about the significance of their data; political leaders complain that reform is badly needed in an enlarged EU and practitioners report a widespread tendency towards a more informal decision-making process. This study intends to contribute to this debate by developing standards and providing new evidence for a more comprehensive assessment. Results are surprising. Has enlargement left the EU unaffected? The jury is out.