Learning from the past: EU enlargement and the question of the free workforce movement

Introduction

The enlargement of the European Union to include the countries of the former Eastern Bloc is high on the agenda of the organization. Only the pace and the process as well as its exact way of implementation are still a matter of discussion among the member states, not the ultimate aim itself: the Union is to accept new members. To the visionaries of European unity (economic as well as political), the step is a logical consequence of the end of the Cold War; Western Europe is to reunite with its Eastern European neighbours putting an end to the dividing line separating the two parts for more than four decades since the end of World War II. The visionaries see the project first and foremost as a political one; it is a moral obligation of Western Europeans to share the fruits of stability, peace and economic prosperity with their poorer neighbours, to whom these benefits have long been denied as a result of power politics, but who nevertheless should be regarded as obvious members of the European family.

The visionary idealism, however strong, will not suffice, if the decision about expansion cannot be motivated by solid economic and political benefits, especially if the idea of expansion is to be “sold” by the political elites to the general public of the current EU member states. And this might prove to be hard. However bright the future of common Europe might eventually be, in the short term, the road to expansion is likely to be a bumpy one. There are numerous problems originating from the fact, that 40 years of iso-
lation from the core of world trade and finance has left the economy of the candidate countries in a miserable state. In the case of Poland, the often-mentioned hurdle on the way towards full EU membership is the country’s inefficient and technologically underdeveloped agricultural sector. Removing this, as well as other obstacles will require a lot of investment, where the EU is expected to be the main sponsor. If expansion is to proceed smoothly, winning over the support of the average EU citizen for the plan is a crucial task for the EU visionaries.

Another problem mentioned in the context of the forthcoming EU enlargement is the implementation of the key principle constituting the present EU system: the principle of free movement of people within the Union. Two countries situated in the eastern periphery of the present Union, Germany and Austria, have raised serious concerns about the consequences the principle might have for their respective labour markets, if it were implemented in the context of the present economic gap which separates them from the candidate countries. The spectre of mass emigration inundating the already strained economies of those states with cheap labour, thus aggravating the problem of unemployment, has prompted the countries to act. A demand has been made for an initial seven-year transition period, during which the citizens of the new member states would be excluded from the benefits of being able to settle down and work wherever they want within the European Union. The interesting fact is that the two countries – Germany and Austria – are quite isolated in their demands. Even EU countries situated in relative proximity of the old socialist bloc, notably Denmark and Sweden, have not raised similar concerns; the latter country has even indicated it is firmly against the transition period and will not implement the restrictions on the free movement of labour from the new member states. How can the split within the Union on the issue of free movement of people be explained? Why do Germany and Austria have concerns, which the majority of EU-members do not share? The hypothesis of this paper is that, while some concerns of those countries may indeed be well founded, the main reasons for this fear are irrational and are to be found in recent history. The fresh mem-
ory of recent historical experiences is shaping the perception of dangers by politicians as well as by the general public.

Irrational or not, the fear is real and its consequences for the prospective members of the EU might prove substantial. The aim of the present paper is to offer an explanation of the German and Austrian behaviour, based on the well known theory of learning from history by Robert Jervis (Jervis 1976). Of course, the explanation offered here does not do justice to every aspect of the problem and should not be viewed as final. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that Jervis’ theory might offer a genuinely useful insight into the reasons behind this recent stumbling block on the way towards EU enlargement. The theory (or rather a tiny portion of it) is presented in the first part of the article. In the second part, we will try to apply the theory; some relevant historical facts are presented which, according to the theory, might be assumed to explain the German-Austrian behaviour. Finally, we look briefly at what substantial reasons there might be for the fear of mass emigration. Is all this simply irrational or are there any real reasons for concern? The article ends with a summary and conclusion.

Lessons from the past

Historical events and experiences are very important for a politician, because they provide him with a number of typical situations; they help him to discover a pattern and a causal context, which will help him/her to understand his world. We cannot understand our surrounding world without assuming that the future somehow will resemble the past. However, a too narrow understanding of history may be dangerous; an underestimation of changed circumstances may result in “a tyranny of the past over the fantasy”.

It has been proved that the more abstract and general the learning process is, the more suitable knowledge will be obtained to solve future problems. Ideally, learning should be based on the analysis of a huge number of events and situations so that we can get the proper idea of the complexity of the present situations and the many unanswered questions. This type of abstract
learning however is extremely rare. Instead, the political decision makers are usually very familiar with only a small number of historical events, which are then used as analogies for a large number of current situations. An overgeneralization takes place of a small number of known events and situations. The whole complexity, the myriad of details gets lost – instead, the simple connections between just some factors are overemphasized. The result of this type of learning is a set of rigid rules, which do not offer any real help in making the right decisions concerning a current situation.

**What kind of lessons is learned?**

The first type of lesson that the actors often learn from previous events is to avoid at any price the policies, which have failed in the near past. The long- and middle-range goals remain unchanged, but the opposite tactics are used to achieve them. In some situations such a reaction to a failure may be justified – for example when it is necessary to modernize military forces after a lost war. Most often however, that may be wrong way to react. The question which should be asked is whether the new tactics could really have been more effective had they been applied in the past situation. Another important question is whether the new situation really resembles the old one or whether the similarity is a false one. More often than not, the answer is no to both of these questions.

The second type of lesson is the opposite of the one just described. The policy which in one situation has proved to be effective will be applied time and again, even in a different set of circumstances and problems. But the old solution used to solve new problems will most often end up in failure. The reasons for that are several. The actors are often unaware of what components in the past situation have made the success of the old solution possible. On the other hand, the new situation may too easily be perceived as similar to the old one, even though they are totally different. The risk of failure is further aggravated by the fact, that the previous success might have fundamentally changed the conditions (for example the conditions on the international arena) in a way, which renders the old policy pointless.
In short, the lessons drawn from previous events often lead to a failure due to oversimplification – which in turn may be caused by stress and lack of time to act and not necessarily by the ignorance of a politician.

In this section we have described a short fragment of what in reality is an extensive body of theory. There is no point developing the theme further in the present article, as the fragments just presented will suffice for our purposes.

Before we proceed with the main point of the article – trying to find an explanation for the stance taken by Austria and Germany on the issue of free movement of labour from Eastern Europe to the old Union members in the West — we will take a quick look at the historical events which may have influenced the minds of the decision makers (and public opinion) in the two countries.

**Historical perspective: Are the emigration waves from Eastern to Western Europe something confined to our own time?**

The answer is, of course, a resounding No! The present migrations are nothing compared to the events which followed the end of World War II, when perhaps the biggest ethnic cleansing of all times was carried out under the auspices of the Allies. About 12 million ethnic Germans were forced to leave their homes in present-day Poland, Russia and the Czech Republic and emigrate to Germany. At the same time, about 2 million ethnic Poles faced a similar fate: They were forced to leave the territories which were to become the new provinces of the Soviet Union and settle down in present day Poland.

Economically motivated movements are of course nothing new either and are as old as the history of Europe itself. The industrial revolution, for example, unleashed a potent wave of immigrants from the Slavic parts of Europe – mainly the Ukraine, Poland, the present day Czech Republic – to the prosperous industrial centres of England, Belgium, France and Germany.
Most of them were quickly assimilated and today only their Slavic family names remind us of the fact that a substantial share of the population in, for example, the Ruhr region (Middle-Western Germany) is of Eastern European origin. (Frassman and Münz 2000)

Perhaps even more important for our present discussion are the events of the last few decades, which directly and indirectly affected the European Union (formerly the European Economic Community). The Cold War had initially stopped any substantial migrations between the two political blocs, but the stop was never a total one. Time and again temporary liberalization and periods of weakness of the state-socialist systems led to minor immigration waves to America and Western Europe. In the West, those immigrants were more than welcome; in the on-going propaganda war with the Communist East they were seen as a concrete proof of the superiority of the market economy and liberal parliamentary systems over the soviet model socialism (Münz 2000). Another important fact to keep in mind about the Cold War is that non-communist South- and Western Europe was not free from migration movements either. The migrations were both politically and economically motivated. The prosperous industry centres of Germany, France and Britain were the destination of dozens of thousands of immigrants from Portugal, Spain and Greece.

Interestingly, the latter stream of immigration has been put ended by the admission of the above-mentioned countries to the European Community. The countries, similar to the present candidates, were admitted in the 1980s with severe restrictions in place on the right to settle and work in the remaining member states of the EEC. The fears of, among others, Germany and France have proved to be unfounded though; the wave big of immigration from Southern Europe simply never came. According to Theo Sommer, this is due to the unprecedented economic boom, which has been unleashed by EU membership. (Sommer 1999) The rapid economic development of those countries created plenty of opportunities at home, thus removing the necessity for many Spaniards, Portuguese and Greeks to seek higher living standards elsewhere.
The end of the Cold War in 1989 initiated a new chapter in the recent history of intra-European immigration movements. Dramatic increase in the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe had several reasons, economic as well as political. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans and Jews emigrated to Germany from Russia and the Ukraine. The civil war in the former Yugoslavia has unleashed a wave of refugees of unprecedented scale in post-war Europe. Between 1982 and 1992 the annual number of immigrants from Eastern Europe rose from about 100 000 to around three million. (Fassman and Münz 2000) Germany was hit especially hard by the new wave of immigration; the main reason for that was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the consequent German reunification. As a consequence, the countries of Western Europe radically changed their strategy. Political leaders, who previously proclaimed the vision of “One Europe without borders”, started to implement the opposite strategy: Many countries restricted the right of political asylum and reintroduced entry visas for the citizens from Eastern Europe. The confrontation of political and economic systems was over; the Western world was no longer in need of any proof of its superiority and, as has been pointed out earlier, the immigrants were previously regarded as such proof.

This brand of restrictive immigration policy is pretty much today’s reality.

**How can the German and Austrian stance on the issues of free movement of labour force be explained?**

Or, is it possible to explain their tough stance on the issue of free immigration from the Eastern European states on the grounds of their recent experiences? The hypothesis of this article is that this indeed is the case. The fresh memories of the events from the early 1990s, when immigration from Eastern Europe to Germany reached its peak, probably still influences the perception of the political decision makers in that country. That could probably explain the differences in this respect between Germany and Sweden; the latter country has not raised the same objections against allowing people from
Eastern Europe to work and settle in Sweden once they have become citizens of the EU. On the contrary, the Swedish government has proclaimed several times during its EU presidency (January – June 2001) that its aim is to achieve a consensus on the issue of the free movement of labour right from the start, without transition periods. If we are right in our hypothesis about the reason for the German and Austrian scepticism, then the behaviour of politicians and the public in those countries seems to confirm the theory Robert Jervis quite well: The last dramatic event is being referred to, with little consideration of the changed circumstances. The underlying assumption is that the history will repeat itself: Once the borders are open, Germany will be inundated with a cheap labour force from the East.

A more sophisticated analysis of recent history would reveal that this scenario may not necessarily come true. The strongest argument against the German stance is no doubt the example of Portugal and Spain. At the time those two countries were admitted to the EEC, there were similar fear across much of northern and Western Europe. Yet, the fears proved to be largely unfounded. The big wave of economic migrants never came, which may be attributed to the fact that after EEC admission, the countries’ soaring economies created enough opportunities for people to stay at home.

Is there any risk that the Portuguese and Spanish scenarios will not repeat themselves? It is of course very hard to say. Historical analogies may give us a hint, but will never say the whole truth. Before we end this article, let us therefore review and discuss some basic facts about the countries ranking highest on the list of candidates for EU membership.

**Basic facts**

Altogether there are about 70 million people living in the Baltic countries, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary, among them about 59 million who will be older than 14 years by time their countries become members of the EU. About 4.7 million people have declared their in-

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terest in emigrating to the West. How serious the desire to emigrate is, is not clear. Only about 820 000 people have concrete plans as to what they would like to do in the West and where they would like to go. About half of them have desire to emigrate to Germany, around one third to Austria – the rest would like to go Scandinavia, Switzerland or North America. The potential migrants will as a rule work in the West on a temporary basis, many would commute if they had an opportunity to do that.

There are also similar estimates coming from economists, which are based on previous experience rather than opinion polls. A 10% difference in wages sets between 0.05 and 0.15 percent of people in motion annually in the country whose wages are lower. With the difference of 20 percent the corresponding figures are between 0.1 and 0.3 percent. If we transfer these estimates to the present EU and candidate countries the result would be about 4 million immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe. The estimates from sociologists and those given by economists are thus similar.

According to Heinz Fassmann and Rainer Münz, of the Berlin Humboldt University, after EU enlargement the number of immigrants will no doubt go up, the question is, however, whether this would really be a bad scenario, considering the shrinking populations of Germany and the other present EU members. Even if the “worst” scenario would come true and 4.7 million people would indeed choose to emigrate, this alone could not reverse the decline in the population numbers of Germany, Austria and Italy. On the other hand, the countries of Eastern and Central Europe should not be treated as permanent suppliers of immigrants. In the long run, with the imposition of market economies, the population growth in those countries is likely to come to a halt, which would adversely influence the immigration rates from those countries still further. According to Fassman and Münz, “in 15 – 20 years from now, when someone in the West will be looking for a cleaner, a gardener or a qualified specialist, he/she is likely to have to look for them in the Ukraine, in Turkey, in North Africa or in India”. (Fassman and Münz 2000)
Alternative explanations

This article would of course not be complete without giving space to some alternative explanations, of the Austrian and German behaviour. While there are many similarities between the situation of the early 1980s, prior to the admission of Spain and Portugal to the EEC and the situation of the present day EU, standing on the threshold to admitting several new member states – there are also important differences. In this situation, the Austrian and German politicians may have reasons for concern, which do not necessarily depend on a mistaken interpretation of recent history.

First of all, they have to take into account the current state of public opinion, which is afraid of growing unemployment, if the citizens of the candidate countries are granted the right to work in the old member states. Especially in the case of Germany, this fear may be well founded. The fact that only a small percentage of Poles declare an interest in emigration does not tell us much about the number of Polish citizens willing to take jobs in Germany on temporary basis, without taking the big step of leaving the homeland permanently. The phenomenon of cross-border commuting exists already and is likely to grow even more if work would be officially permitted. To make matters worse, the eastern part of Germany, which nowadays is severely affected by economic recession and unemployment, is likely to be hit strongest by the arrival of the Polish *Gastarbeiter*.

In this sense there is a difference between the admission of Poland to the EU and the admission of Spain and Portugal to the EEC in the 1980s: The employment situation in parts of Germany is too strained to take the risk of making it still worse. For Germany’s part especially, the geographical closeness of Poland, combined with a sizable Polish community already established inside the country, makes the situation appear slightly different from that preceding the admission of geographically remote (in a relative sense) Spain and Portugal. All this may also, though to a lesser degree, apply to Austria.

Although the latter country does not have any recent experience corresponding to German reunification, the influx of immigrants there has cooled...
down the enthusiasm of public opinion concerning the planned EU enlarge-
ment. Faced with a sceptical public opinion and a EU-hostile right-wing
party inside the government, the Austrian politicians have to act carefully. In
short, public opinion in both Germany and Austria demands caution and the
decision makers have to take these demands into account. The politicians
may share the same fear – making the historical parallels or using the com-
mon sense explanation just discussed – but even if they personally would not
share the same concern, the state of public opinion is a fact they simply can-
not ignore.
Short bibliography


Münz, R. Sie kommen, keine Angst. *Die Zeit* 46.

