

Becoming a new EU member state

Although scepticism towards the European Union is on the rise, there is a wider consensus in support of it. After all, the EU's architecture is chiefly the result of the ideals, work and skills of Germany, France and the UK (after its accession in 1973), all of which have greatly contributed to the progress of mankind, from science and technology to economics and social sciences.

However, in spite of the shrewd detail during the EU's construction process, a notorious failure has been to downplay the role of Europe's regions, both as direct actors and beneficiaries of the process. The fact is that, since protecting the nation states was an imperative of the EU, regional issues have garnered little attention from Brussels, or any special commitment from member states.

Additionally, it is significant that until the Mediterranean enlargement with the accession of Greece (1981), Portugal and Spain (both in 1986), only one EU member, the UK with Scotland, had a regional issue. Belgium, which is really a confederation of two states, and Italy, which has a different structure to the centralised "Jacobin" states of France and Spain, cannot be included in this group.

Furthermore, barring Poland and Romania, both essentially homogenous states

and without the active and ambitious national identities coexisting in Spain (the Basque Country and Catalonia), the rest of the new EU members (up to 13 after the Mediterranean enlargement) are countries whose populations stand around or below the 10 million inhabitant mark. The list includes such new micro members as the three Baltic states, Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus, each of them with less population than Barcelona's metropolitan area (3.3 million).

Today, all 28 member states enjoy equal representation in four of the five key European institutions, irrespective of those huge disparities in size: the Commission (one commissioner per country); the Council of Ministers (one Minister of the ad-hoc topic per country); the European Council (one leader per member state, whose power is partially corrected by the qualified majority vote, with which votes are allocated according to the population); and the European Court of Justice (one judge for every member state).

Furthermore, the Council of Ministers' six-month rotating presidency has been used by small countries to leverage their influence, as Finland and Sweden successfully did some years ago. Finally, the European Parliament allocates a minimum of six MPs to the smallest countries (Luxem-

bourg, Malta, Cyprus and Estonia). All of this adds up to what experts call the "disproportionate influence of smaller states in EU policy process".

By the same token, historical regions such as Catalonia are trapped in a far from envious limbo, for they lack effective means to transmit their dynamism and initiative within European institutions. This is owing to the difficulties, specifically for Catalonia, in recapping any effective power, either through the Committee of Regions (CoR) or from the Council of Ministers, with its new window of flexibility. The CoR has been an attempt to create a European institution run by the regions, but with its power inherently limited due to its advisory character (even more than the Economic and Social Committee itself). And, unfortunately, the regions' role in the Council of Ministers is a rather informal process that depends hugely on the member states' flexibility. Thus, while some German Länders can leapfrog, on specific issues, the Federal government, Catalonia instead faces the Spanish government's stubborn rigidity.

In conclusion, these serious structural problems, among others, have pushed Catalonia in the present to search for ways to modify its status within both Spain and the EU.

RANDOM THOUGHTS

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Renewable energy?

With renewable energy... ('amb energies renovades') began an email from one of my grand-daughters. Then followed a long list of all the things she and her husband needed to do in their ecological market-garden after the summer. There was picking potatoes, planting onions, planting and transplanting many other

crops in preparation for the winter, so that they would arrive at the best time for eating. It is the perfect time for this work, she added, as the earth is now moist and ready to receive. One might say that their work is a means to an end, it is a business after all. And many of our actions in everyday life are the same. Many toil long hours with

modest pay, but where does 'renewable energy' come from if we are not to be exhausted? How can we know if we are as 'ready to receive' as the earth is? If we don't know, the result can only be poor. I think we are tremendously fortunate if we are able to love what we do, however small or mundane the action.

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"Bigger nations should not be able to bully smaller ones (...) people should be able to choose their own future" Barack Obama, US President

Mr. Obama is not a 21st century Woodrow Wilson, but words like this from his mouth are very welcomed by stateless nations around the world—including Catalonia.