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**EXCHANGE RATE ARRANGEMENTS OF ACCESSION COUNTRIES:  
RECENT LESSONS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The focus of the paper is on the institutional arrangements for the accession countries on their way to the eurozone, with a particular emphasis on their exchange rate regimes. Most of these countries are expected to join the EU in 2004, and to adopt the euro a couple of years later. For the accession countries on their road to the euro area specific institutional arrangements are foreseen, which will require substantial institutional change and adjustment in all three phases: present pre-accession phase, next accession phase and the final euro phase. With institutional change we do not mean only building up of new organizations or adapting the existing ones, but much more, broader concepts such as adjusting to the “rules of the game”, complying with the requirements, rules, mechanisms and procedures related to the adoption of the single currency. This broader institutional arrangements are the framework within which concrete economic and legalistic issues of these countries on their way to the eurozone will be dealt with.

Institutional arrangements for the accession countries on their way to the eurozone cover a couple of main themes: a) General principles or strategies of monetary integration prepared for the accession countries, b) Acquis communautaire in the area of EMU, which the accession countries will have to comply with before and after their EU accession, c) Rules and procedures for participating in the exchange rate mechanism ERM 2 and d) Rules and procedures for joining the eurozone. This paper touches upon all of these issues, with an ambition to shed some light on the following questions: Why, how and when will the accession countries finally join the eurozone and adopt the euro? However, special emphasis of the paper is on the two issues: First, rules and procedures for joining the ERM 2 as an interim institutional framework for the exchange rate arrangements and, second, rules and procedures for joining the euro area, as a final destination of the accession countries on their road to monetary integration.

The paper starts from the description of alternative exchange rate regimes currently in use in accession countries. Their present exchange rate arrangements differ substantially, as they cover the whole spectrum of possible solutions, from currency boards to floating exchange rate regimes. By now it is known that these countries will first enter the EU and the ERM 2 (exchange rate mechanism, devised for the so-called pre-in countries, as a preparatory stage before their EMU membership), and only a few years later join the EMU and adopt the euro. The paper therefore tries to evaluate present exchange rate arrangements of the accession countries from the point of view of how compatible these arrangements are with the future ERM 2 and EMU requirements.

On the basis of available information, both from the EU side (including the European central bank) and from the accession countries themselves, the paper tries to identify the most likely timing of the entry of the best prepared accession countries in the eurozone, but also considers alternative scenarios, which may lead to a too early or to a delayed entry of these countries in the eurozone. Related to this, the paper analyses some costs and risks involved in the case if one of these extreme scenarios in fact materialised, both from the point of view of the accession countries and from the point of view of the EU side.

Finally, the paper touches upon the issue of nominal versus real convergence as a precondition for joining the eurozone for the accession countries. For these countries, nominal convergence, embodied in the famous Maastricht convergence criteria, is being supplemented by real convergence, which means speeding or terminating the processes of transition, catching up and structural reform. The paper critically examines the concept of real convergence as a precondition for the entry of the accession countries in the eurozone and warns against the misuse of this concept, which may result in unnecessary delay in joining the eurozone for these countries.

## **2. PAST EXPERIENCE WITH EXCHANGE RATE REGIMES OF ACCESSION COUNTRIES**

Discussions on optimal dynamics of the inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone conventionally start from the analysis of exchange rate regimes of these countries. In the process of joining the EU and the euro area their present exchange rate arrangements will at some point in time have to go through some changes before their final adoption of the euro. The sequence and timing of adaptations of their exchange rate regimes shed some light on the issue of optimal as well as on realistic dynamics of inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone.

Accession countries presently use very different exchange rate regimes, covering practically the whole spectrum from rigidly fixed to free floating exchange rate arrangements. These diverging views among the accession countries on the optimality of the exchange rate arrangements are not a new development. Even at the outset of their transition process in early nineties they opted for different exchange rate regimes. In line with conventional wisdom at that time, which emphasised the role of the fixed exchange rate as a nominal anchor for macroeconomic stabilisation, majority of accession countries

decided for some form of a fixed exchange rate regime. Others, like Slovenia, against conventional wisdom, opted for more flexible solutions, even for a managed floating exchange rate regime. As all exchange rate arrangements basically performed well and fulfilled their main task of stabilising the economy and bringing down inflation rate of the accession countries to the range of (recently low) single digit figures, one can conclude that no single optimal exchange rate regime exists for accession countries and that their choice of an appropriate exchange rate regime should be tailored according to their specific characteristics and priorities. Their choice of the exchange rate regime therefore reflects the main alternative focuses of their exchange rate policies - bringing down inflation, sustaining balance of payments equilibrium, dealing with large and volatile capital flows, stabilising the real exchange rate etc. Anyway, the view that the optimality of the exchange rate arrangements for the accession countries can not be generalised mirrors in the position of the EU on the current exchange rate arrangements of the accession countries. Until they join the EU, there are no restrictions on the choice of the exchange rate regime for the accession countries.

In the period since the beginning of transition, most of accession countries (except Baltic countries and Slovenia) experienced some shifts in their exchange rate regimes. Changes in the exchange rate regimes intensified particularly after currency crises in Asia and Russia. It turned out that some interim solutions, particularly fixed but adjustable exchange rate regimes, are specially vulnerable to speculative attacks related to currency crises. There seemed to be a tendency to move away from interim solutions in the direction of the so-called corner solutions, either in the form of rigidly fixed exchange rate regimes, such as currency boards, or in the form of more flexible exchange rate arrangements, such as managed or even free floating exchange rate regimes. A closer inspection of the exchange rate regime shifts, however, reveals that except for the case of Bulgaria, which moved from a floating exchange rate regime to a currency board as a result of specific circumstances (financial crash and the need to restore confidence), all other regime shifts were in fact in the direction towards more flexible solutions. Hungary, with its present exchange rate regime modelled on the ERM 2 requirements, is a special case. The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland adopted flexible exchange rate regimes, which are close to free floating. This points to a certain contradiction. The move towards more flexible exchange rate arrangements appears to be in contrast with the supposed move towards more fixed exchange rate arrangements which monetary integration with the EU implies, as ultimately the inclusion of accession countries in the euro area calls for an irrevocable fixing of the exchange rate and giving up the exchange rate altogether, when they adopt the euro.

### **3. EU STRATEGY FOR MONETARY INTEGRATION OF ACCESSION COUNTRIES**

Until recently, EU strategy towards inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone was rather vague or undefined, as the discussions on the issue seemed premature. Even simultaneous inclusion in the EU and in the euro area for accession countries was not completely excluded, although signals were sent to accession countries that this would not be a desirable option. In the last two years, EU institutions (European Commission, ECOFIN, European Central Bank) defined their position, coordinated their views and presented rather elaborated strategies towards exchange rate regimes of accession countries in their run-up to the EU and to the euro area.<sup>1</sup>

EU side (in this text we use this term as a shortcut expression, which combines the position of the above mentioned EU institutions) sees the inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone as the final phase of their process of economic and monetary integration in the EU. This process is divided in three distinct phases.

The first phase – preaccession phase - which lasts till the accession of accession countries in the EU, gives accession countries free hands in the choice of their exchange rate regimes. In this phase, they retain their monetary sovereignty, but have to adopt *acquis communautaire* in the field of EMU (completely liberalise capital flows, make their central banks independent, prohibit direct financing of the government by the central bank and prohibit privileged access of the government to financial institutions).

The second phase - accession phase - starts with the inclusion of accession countries in the EU and ends with their inclusion in the eurozone. In this phase, accession countries lose to a considerable degree (but not yet fully) their monetary sovereignty. As this is by far the most relevant phase for the topic of the paper, we will look at it more closely in the following.

The third phase - euro phase - starts when accession countries meet the required criteria for the inclusion in the eurozone, adopt the euro and give up their own national currencies.

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<sup>1</sup> Strategy of the EU side towards accession countries' exchange rate regimes on their way to eurozone can be discerned from European Commission (2000), ECOFIN Council (2001) and European Central Bank (2000). For the IMF view on exchange rate regimes of the accession countries on their way to EMU, see IMF (2000).

From there on, accession countries have equal rights and obligations in the conduct of the single European monetary policy as any other EU members of the eurozone. Their national central banks will be included in the Eurosystem (which consists of the ECB and national central banks of eurozone member countries and their governors will join the Governing Council of the ECB.

Decision-making in the Governing Council of the ECB will have to be adapted to take account of the EU enlargement. At the moment the Governing Council consists of 18 members, 6 members of the Executive board of the ECB and 12 governors of the national central banks of the eurozone member countries. Decision-making rules in the area of single monetary policy of the ECB are now based on one country - one vote principle and on simple majority. However, governors of individual countries should not and in fact are not directly representing their countries with their particular interests. Decisions on the single monetary policy are taken with a view on the overall euro area, disregarding particular interests of individual eurozone member countries. Therefore, the Governing Council in fact needs not resort to voting, decisions are agreed upon by consensus. After the enlargement, membership in the Governing Council of the ECB will expand to close to 30 members. In order to keep decision-making process efficient and to strike a better balance between the interests of large and small countries, the decision-making rules will have to change. At this moment it is difficult to predict the outcome, but it seems that solutions are sought in the direction of either rotating voting mandates (of the US FED type) or constituencies (of the IMF type).

In the second, accession phase, exchange rates of the accession countries become the matter of the common concern. In particular, excessive exchange rate fluctuations or misalignments of their exchange rates would be considered inconsistent with the proper functioning of the single market, i.e. potentially harmful to other EU members. In this context it should be mentioned that after their accession, economic policies of accession countries also become a matter of common concern and become subject to coordination and common surveillance procedures. They will have to prepare convergence programmes and comply with certain provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact. Their national central banks will be included in the ESCB (European System of Central Banks, which consists of the ECB and national central banks of EU member countries) and their governors will join the General Council of the ECB.

Finally, as EU members, accession countries have to share the aims of economic and monetary union. Copenhagen criteria define that the accession countries should fulfil the

obligations from the EU membership, including adherence to the aims of economic and monetary union. In other words, contrary to some incumbent members of the EU, new entrants will not be given the possibility to opt-out of joining the euro area. As a part of their EU package accession countries will at some point - when they are assessed as ready - finally have to adopt the euro even if they opposed it. However, this is not a very relevant concern, since most accession countries expressed their ambition to join the euro area as soon as possible, perhaps even at the time of their EU accession.

When joining the EU, accession countries can not simultaneously join the euro area, even if they had that ambition, for both economic and administrative reasons. Among economic arguments, EU emphasises the following ones: even when joining the EU, accession countries will not be completely normally functioning economies similar to the incumbent EU members; single market which they will join at the time of EU accession can only be a starting point for assessing their readiness for monetary integration with the EU, which means they are not directly comparable or on the same level playing field; even with all their pre-accession adjustments and adoption of the *acquis communautaire*, joining the EU will in itself be a big shock which will require additional adjustment; they need to converge in real terms in parallel or before concentrating their efforts on meeting nominal convergence criteria; because of the inherent transitional and catching-up price dynamics they have to retain some flexibility in their nominal exchange rates. Some of these economic arguments reappear later in the discussion on real vs. nominal convergence.

The administrative reasons, which prevent accession countries from simultaneously entering the EU and the euro zone, are the following: In order to meet the Maastricht convergence criterion of exchange rate stability, as one of the preconditions for joining the eurozone, accession countries will have to participate for at least two years in the ERM 2 (Exchange rate mechanism 2), a specific system of fixed, but adjustable exchange rates. ERM 2, as a successor of ERM, which ceased to exist with the introduction of EMU in 1999, is designed for the so called pre-ins, EU member countries which are not yet ready for joining the euro area. According to present rules, accession countries can not join ERM 2 before their EU accession, which means that for administrative reasons only - even if they fulfilled all other Maastricht convergence criteria and were able to demonstrate their readiness to adopt the euro - they would have to wait for at least two years before being admitted to euro the area.

#### **4. ERM 2 AS AN INTERIM INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

Participation in the ERM 2 is formally voluntary, but accession countries are expected to join this mechanism at the time of their accession to the EU or somewhat later. However, if we combine the fact that on the one hand joining the euro area is ultimately an obligation for accession countries, and that on the other hand participation in the ERM 2 is mandatory for candidate countries, who want to join the euro area, it turns out that the ERM 2 is in fact mandatory for accession countries. Are there any degrees of freedom for accession countries in deciding at least on the timing of their ERM 2 membership?

First let us review the main characteristics of the ERM 2. Basically, it is a system of a fixed, but adjustable exchange rate. Contrary to former ERM, which was a multilateral system of exchange rates among each pair of member countries' currencies, ERM 2 is a bilateral relation between a member currency and the euro. Central rate in euro is determined jointly with the ECB (European central bank), and so is the band of permissible fluctuations of the market exchange rate around the central rate. Accession countries will use a wider band of  $\pm 15\%$  around the central rate, although narrower band of  $\pm 2,25\%$  is in principle also possible, if accession countries performances justified it and ECB agreed to it. Intervention at the margins of the fluctuation bands is mandatory and unlimited, except for the fact that the ECB can refrain from supporting the exchange rate of a currency in the ERM 2, if it was considered to be against the goal of price stability in the euro area as a whole. Realignment of the central rate is possible by agreement with the ECB, if the central rate was seriously misaligned. In principle, realignment of the central rate is possible in both directions, but as the Maastricht criterion on exchange rate stability requires that a currency is kept for two years between normal fluctuation margins without devaluation of the currency at the country's own initiative, the possibility for realignment is in fact asymmetric. While revaluation of a currency is possible, devaluation of a currency would postpone the entry in the eurozone of the country in question for a certain period, since it would have to demonstrate exchange rate stability for additional two years, starting from the moment of devaluation. Obviously, characteristics of ERM 2 make it a flexible enough mechanism to give room for required flexibility of the exchange rates of accession countries in the interim period, while preparing them for their later participation in the euro area.

One of the most important and delicate decisions with respect to participation of the accession countries in the ERM 2 is the agreement on the central rate of their currencies against the euro at the time of their entry in this exchange rate mechanism. In principle, ERM 2 central rate should be the equilibrium exchange rate, reflecting economic



fundamentals and being sustainable in time. This means that the currency of the acceding country should neither be undervalued nor overvalued, so that the exchange rate would not give unfair competitive advantage either to the country or to its EU partners. However, because of serious conceptual and methodological problems with identifying the equilibrium exchange rate, particularly in the case of accession countries, where their membership in the EU in itself is a “structural break” which leads to changes in their equilibrium exchange rates, the ERM 2 central rate will not be determined primarily on the grounds of economic theory and econometric modelling estimations. It can be expected that in practical terms the central rate will be determined on the basis of the past trends of the market exchange rate, or in fact on the basis of the current market exchange rate at the time of the ERM 2 entry which in itself will be rather stable in the preceding period. In other words, current market exchange rates, particularly if stable before the ERM 2 entry, would be taken as the best available proxy for the equilibrium exchange rates. It should be said, however, that determination of the ERM 2 central rates for the accession countries will in the last instance be a political decision, agreed upon in the process involving several actors where ECB will most likely have a decisive role.

Accession countries will probably not be able to by-pass the ERM 2. Slovenia for example tried in the process of negotiations with the EU on EMU chapter to ask for an exemption, which would enable it to by-pass the ERM 2 and open the possibility for an early inclusion in the euro area, perhaps even at the time of Slovenian accession in the EU, by insisting that factual stability of the exchange rate before the EU entry should satisfy the Maastricht exchange rate criterion. As the EU responded negatively to this initiative, which was considered incompatible with the *acquis* on EMU, Slovenia withdrew its proposal from its negotiating position. There is still some possibility for by-passing the ERM 2 for the accession countries, but the chances are slim and exogenous from their point of view. Namely, Great Britain and Sweden oppose to ERM 2 being a mandatory interim mechanism, which they would first have to go through, when and if they at last decided to join the euro area. These countries claim that ERM 2 is not founded in the Treaty on European union, but that it is an intergovernmental agreement, which is less binding and easier to change, if circumstances called for such a change. Additionally, some arguments against the strict interpretation of the participation in the ERM 2 as a criterion of exchange rate stability can be found in the case of Italy and Finland, which at the time of the formal assessment of their readiness for joining the euro area (fulfilment of the Maastricht convergence criteria) had not been participating in the ERM for two years yet.

Regardless of these considerations, accession countries are expected to join the ERM 2 at some point in time, possibly at the time of their EU accession or somewhat later. ERM 2 is currently not open to non-members of the EU, so according to present rules accession countries can not join it earlier than when becoming full EU members. They can apply for the membership in the ERM 2 at any time after their EU accession, but the criteria for the membership in the ERM 2 are not very transparent. The decision to accept a new member is the result of a multilateral procedure involving many countries, ad hoc criteria and discretion, so ex ante it is difficult to assess the outcome. The message is that accession countries can not a priori expect an early membership in the ERM 2 immediately after EU accession, as the procedure allows the EU side some discretion and room for delaying, if it was in their interest to do so. However, accession countries membership in the ERM 2 relatively soon after their EU accession seems most likely, perhaps after allowing for technicalities of the procedure for accepting new members to take a couple of months. The question remains, what would happen if accession countries themselves delayed the entry in the ERM 2 like Sweden does? Although this does not seem to be a realistic option, it would be interesting to see whether the EU side in that case would rush and pressure these countries to join the ERM 2, taking into account that their ultimate membership in the euro area is mandatory.

Until recently, ERM 2 was considered to be a specific homogenous mechanism, whose main characteristics and rules treated all its members in the same way. However, EU side lately changed its attitude somewhat, and interprets the ERM 2 as a broader framework, which can accommodate different exchange rate regimes of individual accession countries. The idea is to enable those countries whose exchange rate regimes are compatible with the ERM 2, to avoid double switching their exchange rate regimes. In the case of a currency board, a country does not have to exit from the currency board to enter the ERM 2, but can enter the ERM 2 with the currency board. In a sense, although participating in the ERM 2, a country can thus directly switch to the euro from the currency board, without unnecessary shifts in the exchange rate regime. Of course, the EU side reserved some discretion as regards the assessment if a concrete exchange rate regime is in fact compatible with the ERM 2 requirements, and as regards ECB assuming any additional obligations from such more binding unilateral commitments beyond its regular ERM 2 obligations. Most of the current exchange rate regimes of the accession countries seen in this light seem compatible with the ERM 2. Exemptions are floating exchange rate regimes, crawling pegs and fixed exchange rates, pegged to another (non-euro) currency. Before entering the ERM 2 these three exchange rate regimes will have to be adjusted, since they either do not have a central rate, or adjust it automatically, or are pegged against

the wrong currency or basket of currencies. The position of the EU side against the recently fashionable proposals from the accession countries for unilateral euroisation is for the moment less defined.<sup>2</sup> In principle, euroisation is considered to be contrary to the concept and rules of monetary integration of the accession countries, which the EU side sees as a multilateral, successive and phased process. The fact that some of the exchange rate regimes, which accession countries use currently, are more compatible with the ERM 2 requirements than some others, does not necessarily mean that those countries are better prepared to join the euro area. Which criteria should be used when assessing relative readiness of individual accession countries for joining the euro area is left for the discussion in the final part of the paper.

## **5. DYNAMICS OF THE INCLUSION OF ACCESSION COUNTRIES IN THE EUROZONE**

Scenario for the monetary integration of the accession countries is according to presently available information therefore the following: At the time of their EU accession or (shortly) afterwards, accession countries will join the ERM 2, but will have a derogation with regard to the euro. They will have to participate in the ERM 2 for at least two years or more, depending on their fulfilment of the Maastricht convergence criteria on a sustainable and healthy basis. They can be assessed for their readiness to adopt the euro anytime at their request or at least every two years. The rules for the new candidates for the euro area are the same as they were in the case of the present euro area members. It is very likely that accession countries will not be given some discounts regarding their meeting of the fiscal Maastricht convergence criteria, as was the case for some EU incumbent members. Recently, some claims emerged in academic literature for adjusting the Maastricht convergence criteria, particularly the inflation rate criterion, to the new circumstances, to take account of the transition-specific price dynamics of the accession countries.<sup>3</sup>

Taking into account recently elaborated EU strategies towards accession countries exchange rate regimes and particularly the role of the ERM 2 in their run-up to the eurozone, discussed in previous parts of the paper, what can be said about the timing of entry of accession countries in the eurozone? First, it is obvious that not all ten accession countries are equally ready for monetary integration. We will concentrate on the timing of

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<sup>2</sup> Some arguments for unilateral euroisation of accession countries are given in Bratkowski and Rostowski (2000) and Nuti (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Suggestions to change the Maastricht convergence criteria in the case of accession countries are given in Pelkmans et al (2000) and Szapary (2000).

the entry in the eurozone for those best prepared, while others are expected to follow in the next couple of years. Second, we start from the assumption that the best prepared accession countries are willing to join the euro area as soon as possible and that they are successful in meeting required preconditions (real and nominal convergence) in time. Third, any discussion on the timing of the entry of accession countries in the eurozone can only be speculative, since there are three uncertainties involved in their the euro dynamics: Uncertainty about the timing of their EU accession, about the timing of their ERM 2 entry and about the timing of their joining the eurozone. Each of these three phases has its own uncertain dynamics, which can combine to quite a large error in the estimated timing of the entry of the best prepared accession countries in the euro area.

What are the interests of both parties involved, the EU side and accession countries, concerning the dynamics of inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone? Generally speaking, accession countries, particularly the best prepared ones, are in favour of an early accession to the eurozone. Their strategies reflect their ambition to join the euro area as soon as possible.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, EU side warns against premature entry of accession countries in the eurozone and seems to prefer a delayed “wait and see” approach. In fact, according to the EU position, accession countries should join the euro area when they are ready (fulfil the Maastricht convergence criteria on a healthy and sustainable basis), but added to this are some pessimistic economic assumptions, demanding preconditions and administrative barriers, which altogether require a long process of adjustment and preparations of accession countries. EU institutions also seem to favour as much discretion as possible in this matter, just to be on the safe side.

Since the attitudes of accession countries and of the EU side concerning the timing of accession countries entry in the eurozone are obviously diverging, the outcome will be the result of the balance of powers between the two sides. As accession countries are “joining the club”, the balance of powers is asymmetric, which means that the timing of their eurozone entry will be from the point of view of accession countries more or less exogenous, i.e. externally determined.

What are the risks from a premature inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone for the EU side and for the accession countries? As far as the EU side is concerned, the risks which call for their overcautious approach to the timing of the entry of accession countries in the eurozone are the following: Inclusion of supposedly weaker currencies of accession

countries could endanger stability and credibility of the euro, could require financial assistance to help accession countries deal with asymmetric shocks in the monetary union, could lead to a bias in the decision making process in the ECB, leading perhaps to looser or more accommodative single European monetary policy. This arguments can be opposed on the ground that the share of accession countries (in terms of GDP or monetary aggregates) in the eurozone and in the Eurosystem will be almost negligible, and that it can not be assumed that accession countries are a priori inclined to less stable financial policies, particularly after many years of adjustment which they went through or still have to go through.

Risks from joining the eurozone for accession countries undoubtedly exist, but they are in principle similar to those of the EU countries. They will lose their monetary policy and exchange rate instruments, but it has to be said that in the process of joining the EU and particularly the ERM 2 they will lose much of their monetary sovereignty anyway, so joining the eurozone will imply only residual loss of their monetary autonomy. The risks accession countries will be exposed to in the euro area are conditional. If they will suffer specific asymmetric shocks, and if alternative adjustment mechanisms (such as wage flexibility in the first place) do not work, they could suffer some decline in growth and employment. This risks need not be too pronounced or specific for them, at least from an ex ante perspective and taking into account that they still have a number of years ahead to undertake needed adjustment and to prepare themselves for participation in the monetary union. Even if these risks in the worse case scenario materialised, their position would still not be much different from that of the regions within federal states, which suffer an asymmetric shock within the “monetary union”, which in a sense a federal state represents from a monetary point of view. However, in the regional adjustment process in federal “monetary unions” some additional instruments of adjustment (common fiscal policy, migration of labour) can be activated more easily than in international monetary unions which lack a strong supranational state. These risks should be in the first place concern and responsibility of accession countries themselves. In the period of preparations they should work on eliminating the causes of domestic asymmetric shocks, and on making their adjustment mechanisms (labour and product markets) more flexible.

On the other hand, there are also obvious benefits for accession countries from their early inclusion in the eurozone. The benefits of joining the euro area for accession countries are similar to those of the EU countries. There are microeconomic advantages (elimination of

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<sup>4</sup> Strategy of accession countries regarding the timing of their EMU accession can be discerned from

exchange rate fluctuations, risks and costs, elimination of currency conversion costs, transparency of prices) and macroeconomic advantages (lowering of the inflation rate and of the interest rate), which accession countries can start collecting as soon as they join the eurozone. If it turns out that accession countries can expect net benefits (higher benefits than costs) from the inclusion in the eurozone, which seems to be the case, they should aim at joining the eurozone as soon as possible in order to collect these net benefits as soon as possible.

Another argument for an early inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone can be found in the fact that in the process of their EU approximation these countries had to liberalise their capital flows almost completely. Before their membership in the EU and in the eurozone they are particularly exposed to potentially volatile speculative capital flows, but have no instruments to protect themselves against them and no support from the EU side, which EU and eurozone members have at their disposal. Once they join the eurozone, their exchange rates can no longer be subject to speculative attacks and they can count on balance of payments support in case of serious asymmetric shocks.

Finally, there are also some political or prestigious reasons for an early membership in the eurozone from the point of view of individual accession countries, which has to do with their rivalry and ambition to be in the first group of new countries to adopt the euro.

Alternative scenarios with respect to the timing of accession countries entry in the eurozone reflect opposing views of the EU side and accession countries and balance of powers between them. From the point of view of possibilities for an early inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone the following three scenarios can be suggested:

Early inclusion: EU entry in 2003-2004, entry in the ERM 2 at the same time, entry in the eurozone two years later, in 2006. This is the first theoretical date for the adoption of the euro for the best prepared accession countries. Optimistic scenario seems very unlikely from the present perspective, as it would require good results in structural reforms and successful fulfilment of the convergence criteria in accession countries, technical efficiency in the assessment of the readiness of accession countries for joining the ERM 2 and the eurozone, and some change in the so far conservative attitude of the EU side towards monetary integration of accession countries.

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European Parliament (1999) and from their current pre-accession programmes.

Delayed inclusion: EU entry in 2005-2006, entry in the ERM 2 a year (or more) later, entry in the eurozone four to five years later, which gives a range between 2010 and 2012 for accession countries to adopt the euro. Realisation of this scenario would require exactly opposite assumptions than in the case of the first scenario. Taking into account the attitudes of the EU side and balance of powers to support it, pessimistic scenario from today's perspective seems more likely than the optimistic one.

Compromise solution: EU entry in mid 2004, entry in the ERM 2 half a year later and entry in the eurozone two and a half to three years later, which gives a range between 2007 and 2008 for accession countries to adopt the euro. This realistic scenario still gives the group of best prepared accession countries more than five years to undertake necessary adjustments and preparations, which is enough, considering the adjustment effort they had to undertake in the past ten years of their transition and EU approximation. Other less prepared accession countries could follow in the next few years.

## **6. NOMINAL AND REAL CONVERGENCE**

The EU side emphasises that criteria for the admission of new members to the eurozone will be the same as criteria that were used for the selection of present members of the euro area. This means that meeting the Maastricht convergence criteria on a healthy and sustainable basis should be for accession countries a necessary and sufficient precondition for their accession in the eurozone. However, starting from their transition-specific characteristics, for accession countries an additional precondition, labelled as real convergence, was introduced lately. Their real convergence should take place in parallel to their nominal convergence or in fact before it, since the idea is that accession countries can not be properly assessed for nominal convergence until they converge enough in real terms. Real convergence is understood as catching-up in the level of their GDP per capita towards the average in the EU, implementation of necessary structural reforms and termination of their process of transition. The concept of real convergence is rather vague, and no specific indicators which could be assessed in quantitative terms are suggested as real convergence criteria, although it can not be excluded that such formal criteria may emerge in time.

It can be argued that the concept of real convergence was introduced for the accession countries because of the fear that after joining the EU, accession countries would be able to fulfil the nominal convergence criteria relatively quickly, so that it would be difficult for the EU side to find arguments and instruments to keep them out of the eurozone, if it

considered their membership in the euro area as premature. It is to be reminded that the Maastricht convergence criteria failed in keeping out the Southern, supposedly financially more problematic EU members out of the eurozone. This can explain why the concept of real convergence was introduced - to allow some discretion of the EU side for keeping accession countries out of the eurozone for a while, if necessary. The concept of real convergence can be dangerous since because of its discretionary nature it can be misused to postpone the entry of accession countries in the eurozone into indefinite future. When will accession countries converge enough in real terms? Catching-up, even if not interrupted, is a lengthy process. Transition in a sense that CEE are still different from EU countries will hardly ever end. Structural reforms can also continue indefinitely.

The main question in the nominal versus real convergence debate is probably the following one: Is monetary integration among countries at a different level of economic development possible? The answer should be yes. Historical monetary unions, existing monetary unions, and even European monetary union itself, which includes member countries with considerably different GDP per capita levels, demonstrate this. It would be easier to run a monetary union with member countries at the same level of economic development, but in reality this never happens. What matters most is the readiness of member countries to conduct responsible monetary and fiscal policies, if the monetary union is to survive. Another argument in support of the case can be found in federal states, which are conditionally speaking “monetary unions”, normally consisting of regions at a different level of economic development (take as an example Italy with its developed northern and underdeveloped southern regions). However, as was mentioned before, monetary unions at the international level are more demanding than those at the national level, since a country can use additional mechanisms of adjustment to deal with regional asymmetric shocks in a “monetary union”.

Finally, it is evident that not all accession countries are equally suitable and prepared for monetary integration. A convoy approach to the accession of accession countries in the eurozone would not be appropriate. Best prepared candidates should not wait for the others, but go ahead, join the eurozone and themselves set an example that accession countries can be successful members of the euro area. Given the problems with interpreting and measuring nominal and real convergence, discussed earlier in the paper, it is at this point evidently difficult to assess even relative readiness of individual accession countries for joining the process of monetary integration. Maastricht convergence criteria alone, at least in this stage, may be misleading, due to conceptual, interpretational and methodological problems of applying them to accession countries. Additional help can



come from comparisons based on their real convergence. Finally, some optimum currency area indicators can shed some light on relative suitability of individual accession countries for joining the euro area.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

The paper started from discussing alternative exchange rate regimes of accession countries with an ambition to assess their relative compatibility with the EU-determined exchange rate strategy for accession countries in their run-up to the eurozone. Special emphasis was given to the analysis of the ERM 2 as an interim exchange rate mechanisms which CEE will have to participate in for a certain period, before being admitted to the euro area.

In order to shed some light on the dynamics of the inclusion of accession countries in the eurozone, the paper tried to identify the interests of accession countries and of the EU side with respect to the timing of CEE entry in the eurozone, and found these interests to be diverging. Taking into account the balance of powers between both sides and after elaborating some arguments for and against an early compared to a delayed entry of these countries in the euro area, an attempt was made to present three scenarios with respect to the timing of accession countries' entry in the eurozone.

Next, the paper touched upon the debate of nominal versus real convergence and its relevance for the dynamics of inclusion of accession countries in the euro area. The conclusion is that the concept of real convergence can be dangerous if misused, since it gives the EU side too much discretion and the possibility to delay the adoption of the euro even for the best prepared accession countries into indefinite future, against the ambitions of these countries. Finally, it is argued that accession countries should not be treated as a homogenous group, but that the best prepared candidates should go forward and themselves set an example. It is difficult to assess relative readiness and suitability of individual accession countries for monetary integration, but some combination of nominal and real convergence criteria, as well as of optimum currency area criteria should be helpful, particularly if all of these indicators pointed to the same direction.

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