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The enlargement imperative. The EU between historical chance and great risk (part 1)

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The discussion on the enlargement of the European Union has gained new momentum. The admission of new members from Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans is now being presented as a strategic necessity. This has reinforced expectations among candidate countries and sparked debate about the indispensability of institutional reforms among member states. Key decisions on enlargement will be made by the end of 2023. The change in narrative and rise in expectations create a historic opportunity, while also bringing certain risks.

Grenada Summits. On 5 October 2023, the third summit of the European Political Community (EPC) was held in Granada, Spain, while the leaders of the European Union's member states deliberated the following day in the same city, as part of an informal European Council summit. One of the main goals of these events was to officially open the debate on the form and timetable for the admission of new members to the EU, currently nine countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Georgia, Kosovo, Serbia, North Macedonia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

EPC without specifics. The European Political Community is a relatively young format for international dialogue, established at the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Its members include all European countries, with the exception of Russia and Belarus. The purpose of establishing the EPC was to expand political dialogue on issues fundamental to European security – primarily related to military threats and energy – beyond European Union member states. The previous meeting of this format was held on 1 June 2023, in Chisinau ([“IEŚ Commentaries” No. 863](#)). Each summit is seen as an opportunity to strengthen the Community and crystallize its role in the modern international order. It was hoped, moreover, that it would provide an opportunity to establish a dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and between Serbia and Kosovo. However, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not attend the meeting. The Turkish leader's absence was significant both in the Karabakh context (Turkey is supporting Azerbaijan in this conflict) and for the functioning of the EWP in the future – Erdoğan left the meeting of this format for the second consecutive time. The leaders of Serbia and Kosovo were in Granada at the time, but their meeting did not take place.

A prominent feature of the summit, primarily on a symbolic level, were the speeches by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who called for maintaining European unity in supporting Ukraine in its defence of Russia's invasion. The issue of EU enlargement was not part of the formal agenda for the summit, mainly because decisions on the matter must first be made among EU members. Nevertheless, this topic dominated the three main areas of discussion, which were: 1) digitization, 2) energy, environment and green transformation, and 3) multipolarity and geostrategy – primarily in the context of necessary reforms of international institutions.

The ECP talks are informal and consultative, so they do not end with official agreements or declarations. However, it is customary for the Summit to close with a press conference to summarize the talks and present the most important conclusions. This time, the conference did not take place due to a dispute between Spain and the UK (which will host the next ECP meeting). The UK Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, demanded that the topic of migration be included in official communications. Summit host Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez wanted to avoid this, so as not to define the narrative on this sensitive topic before the meeting of EU leaders.

European Council – enlargement in the shadow of migration. The idea was that the meeting of EU member state leaders would define the direction of discussions on EU enlargement. “The Grenada Declaration,” a draft of which was presented before the meeting began, stated: “Enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity.” In early November 2023, the European Commission is expected to announce its recommendations for the start of membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. A decision on the issue is expected to be made at the EU summit in December. In the popular and media perception, however, the meeting in Grenada was dominated by the topic of migration. The prime ministers of Poland and Hungary – Mateusz Morawiecki and Victor Orbán – objected to the inclusion of two paragraphs in the final declaration relating to the EU’s action plans towards illegal migration. This was mainly symbolic, as formally the work on the adoption of the so-called migration and asylum package can no longer be blocked.

European enlargement discussion. The discussion of EU enlargement gained new momentum after Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status in June 2022 ([“IEŚ Commentaries” No. 660](#)). Talks on the subject are also being held with Georgia. In this situation, it has also become obvious that the EU must respond to the expectations of the societies of the Western Balkan countries – some of which were granted candidate status years earlier (this is especially true of Albania and North Macedonia, whose governments have been strongly pursuing pro-European policies for years). Within the EU itself, a qualitative change on the issue took place after a turnaround by France in the spring of 2023 – a country traditionally seen as reluctant to consider enlargement became one of the animators of the process. According to a declaration by European Council President Charles Michel, enlargement could take place as early as 2030. EU leaders, mainstream media, and numerous think tanks refer to the topic of enlargement in terms of a strategic necessity for European security and prosperity. At the same time, it is made clear that the potential admission of nine new countries, with a total population of about 70 million, must be conditioned not only by reforms in the candidate countries but also by major changes in the functioning of the EU. This is reflected in the “Grenada Declaration”, which states that the Union, in preparing for enlargement, “needs to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms”.