

Editorial Team: Beata Surmacz (Director of ICE), Tomasz Stępniewski (Deputy Director of ICE), Agnieszka Zajdel (Editorial Assistant), Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, Jakub Olchowski, Konrad Pawłowski, Agata Tatarenko

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Piotr Oleksy

The enlargement imperative. The EU between historical chance and great risk (part 2)

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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.

Ideas for reform. A report into the possible direction of EU reforms, prepared by a group of twelve experts, titled *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century* was presented on 18 September 2023. The report was commissioned by the foreign ministries of France and Germany. It is stressed, however, that it presents only an expert opinion, which, while it can be taken as a starting point for discussion, does not present the official position of Paris and Berlin. The report's creators emphasize that the current geopolitical, political, and economic challenges require the EU to make changes to accommodate new members while strengthening three aspects of the Union's functioning: increasing its capacity to act, strengthening the rule of law and democratic legitimacy, and making the EU institutions ready for enlargement.

A fundamental change in the approach to the shape of European integration has been proposed. So far, it has been implemented holistically, within the framework of the all-or-nothing model: a country joining the EU adapts to its rules so that it enjoys all the privileges of integration (this is a model assumption; in fact, there are already various degrees of integration, such as the Eurozone or the Schengen Area). Instead, the report's creators propose the formation of four circles of integration:

- 1) an inner circle, linking the countries of the Euro and Schengen zones, assuming the tightest integration;
- 2) the European Union itself, bound by the same political objectives, benefiting from cohesion funds and redistributive policies;
- 3) associated states, with equal rights and principles of cooperation with the EU (currently the Association Agreements are very different); the basic requirement for membership in the circle is a commitment to democratic values and the rule of law, the main platform for integration – the common market;
- 4) European Political Community – would not include any form of integration with binding laws or specific rule of law requirements and would not allow access to the single market but would focus on geopolitical convergence and political cooperation in areas such as security, energy, and the environment.

The report recommends that the accession negotiation process should not be conducted simultaneously and in parallel with the entire "bloc" of candidates, but that these countries should be divided into smaller groups to streamline the implementation of reforms, enable visible progress where possible, and counteract political conflicts between candidates and between current members and candidates. In turn, according to the report's authors, preparing EU institutions to welcome new members requires changes in the political decision-making

process. This primarily concerns allowing the use of majority voting in foreign and security policy issues in the European Council and the Council of the European Union (so far, decisions in these areas require unanimity). It is also expected that the admission of nine new members will require a structural reform of the European Commission. Currently, each member state has its own commissioner, which, in the event of full enlargement, would render the body dysfunctional. The report's creators propose two options: reducing the number of commissioners or introducing a gradation between "lead commissioners" and "commissioners," with only the former having voting rights within the commission college.

The text stresses significantly and repeatedly that the EU, wishing to develop and strengthen its position in the world, must not give up its fundamental values. Therefore, the reforms should provide for the possibility of drawing consequences against members who violate the principles of democracy and the rule of law. Provision is made for both budgetary procedures and limitations on powers in the decision-making process. The report's creators note that the European Union's current treaty framework already allows for many of the above changes.

It is worth noting at the same time that this is not the only proposal for the shape of the Union after enlargement. Also under discussion at the same time was the position of the European Parliament, which called on EU leaders to start work as early as next year on treaty reforms in preparation for enlargement. At the same time, Euro parliamentarians pointed in a different direction from the one described above: they called for closer integration and more pressure on member states to follow this trend or leave the EU (the "all or nothing" model implemented more literally).

Conclusions:

There has been a significant change in the European narrative regarding enlargement in recent months. The issue, from a topic raised with detachment and out of distasteful obligation, has become one of the main threads of discussion about the future of the European Union, seen as a strategic necessity. This is a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and changes in the modern international order, which is evolving toward multipolarity. It is stressed that in such a world, the European Union, wishing to take care of its security and development, must have the potential and capacity to act, enabling it to actively co-shape global security as well as economic and environmental processes. In the language of the European Union's leaders, it is increasingly framed as an entity that faces strategic and geopolitical challenges, not just socio-economic ones. At the same time, it is stressed that this can't mean a departure or a kind of "relaxation" in the sphere of values.

The issue of EU enlargement is currently the only topic of fundamental importance for the entire Community on which there is formal consensus among its members. This situation creates a unique opportunity for candidate countries, but it does not mean that the future of enlargement is a foregone conclusion. As the debate about the shape of the future Union, as well as the course of the Grenada summits, shows, ultimately the topic of enlargement will be intertwined with many other issues.

Both the contents of the expert report and the European Parliament's position have stirred up a great deal of controversy among member states. The former was accused of promoting a vision of a "multi-speed Union," which until recently was regarded with great reluctance by most member states. This was due to the fear that integration outside the "inner circle" would be a kind of imitation. Also controversial is the idea of introducing majority voting on foreign and security policy issues. It is often stressed here that for the smallest EU members, this is sometimes the only mechanism by which they are able to draw attention to their own problems and expectations in other fields (by blocking a decision in this sphere they de facto negotiate other issues important to them). Voices of dissatisfaction were also associated with the proposal to make significant changes without revising the treaties (the report's authors themselves claim that current EU law allows for such changes).

Concern is also raised that the imposition of will on foreign and security policy issues, seen as closely related to national sovereignty, could lead to the strengthening of political forces working for individual states to leave the EU. This last reflection is also the main axis of criticism of the European Parliament's position. Summarizing this theme, it should be said that much of the criticism stems from fears that reforms preparing the EU for its enlargement could lead to its disintegration.

It should also be noted that the current formal consensus on the issue of enlargement is the result of the current political alignment, which can be shaken or significantly altered as a result of electoral processes. The example of France, which under the leadership of Emmanuel Macron has recently become a supporter of enlargement, is telling here. It is reasonable to ask whether this course will continue after the next presidential election in that state. Of course, this question applies to many other countries. Doubts are also being raised in the European press about the sincerity and sustainability of support for Ukraine's admission to the EU. It is noted that geopolitical factors, i.e., the consideration of Russia's interests in its own foreign policy, may ultimately influence the decision of, for example, Hungary or Slovakia. Equally legitimate are concerns that there will be increased pressure among Central European countries from social groups fearful of competition from producers from the new member states (primarily Ukraine).

The recent European Political Community summit also spread doubt about the usefulness of this format, even as a platform for dialogue. The non-attendance of the leaders of Azerbaijan and Turkey, the absence of a meeting between the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo, and finally the dispute between the UK and Spain over the shape of the final communiqué indicate that countries which are not EU members are beginning to view the EPC simply as a platform for the EU to impact its neighbourhood. This is at odds with their expectations and ambitions, which could undermine the viability of the Community in the future. However, it should be remembered that the format is so young that the meaning and mechanisms of its operation are only just being formed.

The fact that the topic of welcoming new members enjoys the formal support of EU leaders – unlike many other fundamental issues – creates a historic opportunity, while also bringing certain risks. Observing the political dynamics inside the Union, one can express concern that it will become a substitute topic to indicate the vitality of the EU, covering up numerous internal conflicts related to issues of migration, the rule of law, the future shape of institutions, and access to funds. In this situation, the positive dynamics of the enlargement policy could suddenly be blocked in the future as a result of disputes on other fronts. In the face of rising expectations among the public in the candidate countries, this would cause a huge crisis of credibility for the European Union, weaken its influence in neighbouring countries, and negatively affect security in the region.

In this situation, it is crucial that upcoming decisions and communications skilfully maintain positive momentum while not overheating expectations. In addition, dialogue and political action are needed inside the European Union to give credibility to the formal consensus on enlargement.