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FINAL REPORT: EUROPEAN CONFERENCE 2024 ARE WE READY FOR THE EU OF 30+?

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Ukraine at the centre of the EU enlargement policy, with a potential to re-set the process also with the Western Balkans

Ukraine is now the biggest candidate country for the EU membership and – despite all the difficulties – perhaps the most enthusiastic country to join the EU. Still, there are issues that need to be tackled by Ukraine, as well as by the EU.

For Ukraine, one of the main problems is the lack of appropriate institutional capacities to tackle the process and meet EU requirements as, in addition to the accession, it is currently dealing with both an ongoing war and reconstruction efforts. Moreover, even though Ukrainians' desire to join the EU has not waned, the society does not yet realise the amount of work and change that is involved in such a process. Therefore, it is in the interest of both the Ukrainian government (and the EU as well) to use the momentum and existing enthusiasm to carry on in-depth reforms as quickly as possible in order to avoid the rejection and frustration that would result from an endless process. An enlargement fatigue, as observed in case of the Western Balkan countries over the past few years, should serve as a sufficiently motivational example. In that regard, the possibility of a deeper cooperation with the Western Balkans could be further studied as long as these countries are serious in their will to work towards the EU. Indeed, the accession being perceived as a life or death situation by Ukraine, it will not let a lack of political will from potential partners to refrain its ambitions.

The EU has issues of its own to deal with. According to polls, a majority of Europeans is in favour of enlargement as long as it is not fast-tracked, but this question is not a priority, since economic issues are the main subject of the electoral campaign today. Involved stakeholders should not give up on the subject of the EU enlargement, especially because it can be a powerful argument in populists' hands. To tackle such a threat, the key lies in communication which must be personalised to every country, and most of all, in presenting the enlargement not only as a necessity for Ukraine, but also an opportunity for the EU. Ukraine could indeed be a powerful added value in terms of

economy, defence or agriculture, but such qualities are today denied by the disinformation raging in Europe.

In addition to this kind of reviewed communication, the EU must lead reforms to cope with any future enlargement. The forthcoming elections to the European Parliament will serve as a test of whether the EU will maintain the dynamics of the enlargement process and stick to its promises given to Ukraine and other applicant countries for their membership.

Internal reform of the EU as a prerequisite to future enlargement?

An internal reform of the EU has been discussed over the past few years on both political and expert levels. It becomes even more relevant and urgent when discussing this issue together with countries aspiring to become new EU member states and especially in the wake of an important enlargement wave, as was the case twenty years ago. Reforming the EU in order to cope with these additions should be in every country's interest, may they be candidate countries or member states.

Three reforms are of particular importance. The first one is the change of voting procedure. It is widely accepted that the EU cannot function well anymore with unanimity voting system which gives a veto power to each country individually, a situation which would even worsen in the event of further enlargement. However, smaller countries especially could perceive such change as a reduce of their power. A solution to said problem could therefore be the creation of a grouped veto: one requiring a minimum amount of voters so as to avoid individual blockage while maintaining a vector of sovereignty in the voting procedure.

The second subject is the reform of the enlargement process itself, after an acknowledgement of the frustration resulting from the lack of clear calendar. To overcome this issue, the solution would be to make the accession process time-bound in order to avoid endless procedures.

Finally, the necessity to overcome a multi-speed Europe can be mentioned. Indeed, this differentiated structure would be seen as a hesitation by candidate countries and make the prospect of fully joining the EU a distant one, as it would multiply the steps of the accession process. In fact, nothing guarantees that this differentiated Europe will move in the same direction, the EU would therefore risk fragmentation.

Discussing the needed reforms also implies thinking about the way to "sell" them, considering the support of the population is key in succeeding in such a process. Three conditions have been developed in that regard. Europe firstly needs leaders with a long-termed vision, as reforms can only be thought for the long-term and must not be bound to short-term and political considerations. The public support must also be acquired and maintained thanks to a revised communication, emphasising the positive aspects of such reforms and enlargement, as well as the opportunities it represents for

the EU. Finally, the public support will necessitate concrete projects to refer to as ideals can only fuel enthusiasm for so long.

Another problem on the side of the EU is the rise of nationalist populism in some of the member states, as well as a democratic backsliding in some of the countries that joined the EU in the 2004 “big bang” enlargement.

Recommendations

- The ongoing war in Ukraine is the biggest security challenge for the EU. The way in which the war would end up should be completely on Ukraine, which means that no solution can be imposed from outside. The EU should accept any kind of the status quo if Ukraine agrees with it. One of the options includes a divided country solution modelled on the example of Cyprus, where only the Greek part of the island managed to accede to the EU. Even in such a situation the EU could and should go forward with the enlargement process and accession of Ukraine to the EU.
- EU enlargement is now fuelled more than ever by geopolitical considerations. However, political decisions should comply with the merit-based approach, which means that all future member states should fulfil the accession criteria.
- Ukraine could have been a strong partner with whom other candidate countries might be willing to team up with in order to gain negotiating power. The possibility of a deeper cooperation with Ukraine might therefore be advised for the Western Balkan countries. Such cooperation could be intensified both at governmental and non-governmental levels and could be profitable also for Ukraine, as it will be able to learn some lessons from the integration process of the Western Balkan counterparts.
- The transactional view of the EU should not replace the image of the EU based on the maintenance of core democratic rule of law mechanisms. The communication mechanisms of the EU towards the member states and their citizens should be improved.
- The issue of sovereignty should be further discussed, as there exist different views on it among various political stakeholders in the EU member states. With their accession to the EU the member states gave up certain part of their sovereignty in favour of EU institutions and further passing of the elements of sovereignty depends solely on their decision. The most efficient performance of sovereignty of a member state is through its active shaping of the EU policies and collective decision making on issues of joint importance. Other types of sovereignty are inward-looking and actually lead to the increase of nationalism and isolationism.