By PhD Spasimir Domaradzki

Over the past two decades, the European Union’s enlargement policy has transformed from an enlargement effort into a tool for managing its immediate surroundings. Thus, the enlargement policy has lost its credibility in the eyes of the candidate countries. Enlargement is not an attractive topic within the EU either, and European societies are cautious about the prospect of new members. Today, in the face of a return to rivalry in international relations, the enlargement policy must regain credibility, both within the EU and towards the countries queuing for membership.

Towards the Polish Presidency

Although the details of the Polish presidency of the Council of the European Union have not been officially presented to this day, it can be concluded from the expose of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski that its main theme will be broadly understood security. Among the main aspects will be the strengthening of the transatlantic community and the emphasis on the inextricable link between the European project and democracy and the rule of law. Enlargement policy is also one of the priorities. Importantly, from the Polish perspective, the eastern and Balkan directions of enlargement reinforce each other. Polish’s goal in the context of enlargement policy is to synchronize the foreign policy of the candidate countries with EU values.[1]

Minister for European Affairs Adam Szłapka also mentions among the main priorities Polish strengthening transatlantic cooperation, EU enlargement and broadly understood security, in many dimensions, i.e. m.in energy security, defence and defence industry, border protection, counteracting hybrid threats, as well as mass disinformation.[2]

A brief diagnosis of the weaknesses of the EU’s enlargement policy

The enlargement policy is, at least formally, considered one of the most important and successful policies of the European Union. The justification for this argument is the fact that since the 1950s, the process of European integration has consistently

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

included other countries. It was only the formal exit of the United Kingdom in 2020 that put an end to the belief in the one-way and borderless process of enlargement of the European Union.

However, while Brexit can be considered a shock in the history of the European Union, or an exception to the rule of a permanently effective policy of the European Union aimed at further enlargement, the policy of enlargement of the European Union itself is undergoing a kind of metamorphosis, which is moving it further and further away from its essence, i.e. the process of admitting new countries. There are many reasons for this and due to the narrow scope of this text, I will mention only some of them casually.

Already at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Otton Anastasakis[3] pointed out that the European Union’s enlargement policy was changing its weight. While the main goal of the 2004/2007 enlargements was to complete the process of joining the countries that expressed their desire for membership, after the fifth wave of enlargement, the European Union is placing much more emphasis on the path to membership itself. From the perspective of the last fifteen years, the effects of this change are more than visible. Only Croatia joined the European Union in 2013, and with Brexit included, the Union shrank rather than expanded.

What is more, the “waiting room” for membership, in which the countries of the Western Balkans have been since the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, has become a kind of permanent state in which the candidate countries endure. Moreover, with the return to open geopolitical competition with Russia, Ukraine and Moldova were also included among the candidate countries, which in practice even undermined the logic of the enlargement policy itself, which until 2022, even if only formally, had so far differed from the neighbourhood policy.

It is a logical contradiction that in the case of the Balkan states, the conflicts of the 1990s were a justification for their different treatment and a longer path to the EU, while in the case of Ukraine, it turned out that it was the full-scale Russian aggression that led to obtaining the status of a candidate country. A status that even the Association Agreement between Kiev and Brussels did not provide.

An extremely important, albeit scrupulously marginalised, problem of enlargement policy is enlargement fatigue, which has evolved over the last twenty years. At first, it manifested itself in the fear of an influx of workers or impoverishment among the societies of the countries already belonging to the EU. The European elites decided

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

that the best remedy for this problem is silence and time. However, time has not dispelled fears, and subsequent crises have had a negative impact on the prospect of further EU enlargement. The economic and migration crisis have overshadowed social tensions within the European Union, but have not solved their foundations. What is more, the tangible development of new EU members and the prolonged stagnation in the so-called “old” Union also fuel demanding attitudes. Little has been done to dilute the pre-accession stereotypes that still divide Europe into ‘east’ and ‘west’ or ‘old’ and ‘new’. It is therefore no coincidence that, whenever they are asked, the populations of the ‘old’ Member States in particular are sceptical about the prospect of further enlargements[4].

Another factor is the process of politicization of the integration process. Supporters of deepening integration dreamed of politicising the integration process, which they saw as the most effective tool for transferring further competences to the EU level. However, when it turned out that the Treaty of Lisbon expanded and strengthened the EU institutions in relation to nation states, politicization also took the face of “resistance to the European dictate”. Interestingly, the more resistance to EU decisions, the more fiercely EU institutions try to impose their vision.

Until now, the next stages of the integration process have been determined by successive treaties. However, when it turned out that for over a decade there had been no good will to adopt another treaty, the EU institutions began to implement the policy of fait accompli, using all possible non-treaty tools, including blowing up the administration, using judgments of the Court of Justice of the European Union[5] to overinterpret the provisions of the Treaties, or abuse their competences. The enlargement policy fell victim to these actions, and became hostage to political bargaining on treaty reform.

Allegedly, such a reform is necessary for the smooth functioning of the EU, although it completely ignores the fact that the UK’s exit has left an institutional gap that the “waiting room” states could quickly fill. In this sense, the enlargement policy has become hostage to a blind effort to deepen integration and, above all, to weaken the role of the state in the integration process. This can be seen in the proposals of pro-federal think-tanks, combining enlargement policy with treaty reform, which, from promoting qualified majority voting (QMV) to abandoning full integration in favour of staged integration, seek above all to weaken the role of the member states at the expense of EU institutions. As if further EU enlargement without deepening integration was not possible at all.

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

An equally important problem is the instrumentalisation of enlargement policy at the national level. The politicization of the integration process has caused that today the attitude towards the EU positions voters on the political scene. Recognising the potential of politicising the integration process at the national level, politicians have begun to use the European Union in their political rhetoric. Some, like President Macron, have gone even further, using EU policies for their own political ends, such as vetoing the start of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in 2019.

Enlargement policy has also become hostage to bilateral relations between member states and candidates. And although this thread is not a novelty in the integration process, it is now a convenient justification for the lack of progress in relations between the European Union and the candidate countries.

Equally important is the decline in public support for membership among the societies of the candidate countries. At the same time, the justification that this is due to Russian propaganda[6] completely obscures the fact that the societies of the Balkan countries are tired with the prospect of endless enlargement. Moreover, the recent elections in North Macedonia in April and May 2024 have shown that challenging the negotiating framework with the European Union is an effective electoral strategy.

Looking at the EU’s relations with the candidate countries of the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova, one can get the impression that today “European values” play the role of a “protective shield” against accession to the Union, rather than an expression of common principles constituting the basis for cooperation. Thus, today we are dealing with the instrumentalisation of enlargement policy as a tool of everyday politics and not as the overarching objective of the European Union. Moreover, the desire to use enlargement policy as a justification for deepening the integration process also makes it a hostage within EU politics.

Until now, the European Union has consistently based its relations with candidate countries on the principle of conditionality, which is justified when there is a sincere desire on the part of the candidate to join. Then, the pressure is a natural consequence of the liberal-institutional conviction that, firstly, the candidate countries uncritically strive for membership at all costs and, secondly, that the European Union is unchangeable in relation to them. From the perspective of the last decade, both of these assumptions seem passé.

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

Both the new enlargement methodology of 2020 and the concept of enlargement and internal reforms of the European Union of 2024 are not attempts to make the enlargement process more dynamic and implement the enlargement process for countries in the “waiting room” for membership, but steps justifying the lack of enlargement. Emphasising the rule of law in a situation where there are countries in the European Union that have not yet managed to reform the judiciary, fight corruption or organised crime is an example of hypocrisy rather than credibility and has a negative impact on the perception of the European Union in the candidate countries. Moreover, taking into account the current mood in the European Union countries, linking the reform of the European Union with enlargement depreciates the enlargement policy and deprives it of any subjectivity.

Hungary, Poland, enlargement policy

The current Polish-Hungarian relations are based not so much on separate priorities as on their interpretation. While both countries condemn Russian aggression and advocate for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, they see relations with the Ukrainian authorities in a completely different way. Moreover, there is a public awareness in Poland that the severing of economic ties with Russia entails social and economic costs, while the Hungarian authorities believe that condemnation and cooperation with the Russian Federation go hand in hand. However, the Hungarian veto, blocking the payment of funds to Poland related to the costs made for Ukraine, remains incomprehensible and serves only Russian interests.[7]

A similar discrepancy should be emphasised in the context of the relations between the two countries and the EU institutions. While the European Commission has completed the Article 7 procedure against Poland, relations between Budapest and Brussels remain difficult. Moreover, in specific cases, such as the Georgian “law on foreign agents” and the de facto Hungarian reluctance to support Ukraine, these are serious enough issues that negatively affect the willingness to cooperate between Poland and Hungary. There is therefore a fear that in this case too, the enlargement policy is becoming hostage to different visions not only of integration, but also of relations with Brussels and its neighbours, which will have negative consequences for the efforts to renew the enlargement policy.

Given the nuances in the approach of Poland and Hungary to enlargement policy, it seems realistic to concentrate energy at points of convergence. First of all, it concerns efforts to regain the subjectivity of the enlargement policy, to free it from the muzzle of discussion on the reform of the European Union, and to hold an

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

honest debate on its legitimacy. All the more so because delaying or not enlarging will make candidate countries a source of potential geopolitical instability.

Recommendations

Both Poland and Hungary are among the countries that unequivocally support the policy of further enlargement of the European Union. At the same time, they differ in their attitude towards Ukraine, but they agree on the vision of enlargement to include the countries of the Western Balkans. Since the enlargement policy is a clearly defined priority of the foreign policy of both countries, the successive presidencies of the Council of the European Union should be used to emphasise the need to increase the importance of this policy in the hierarchy of priorities of the European Union.

1. First of all, it is necessary to return to the subjectivity of this policy, separating it from the discussion for the reform of the European Union. Restoring the policy of extension to the primary objective of the integration process is essential to regaining its credibility. In addition, the lack of a clear vision and political will to change the treaties demotivates candidate countries, which see that the lack of progress in reforming the EU is tantamount to a lack of progress in the enlargement policy.
2. Second, both Hungary and Poland can use the time to emphasise the need to return to clear, measurable and unambiguous membership criteria. This is a necessary step not only to improve the enlargement policy but, above all, to regain the credibility of the European Union among the countries that are on the path to membership for more than two decades.
3. Thirdly, an effort should be made to return to the internal EU discussion on the objectives and limits of the enlargement process. Today, there is no social awareness on this subject, and in Western European countries it is even a taboo subject. This debate must go hand in hand with increased dynamism in relations with the candidate countries.
4. Fourthly, it is necessary to be critical of the current state of relations between the EU and the Western Balkan countries. The situation regarding the fight against corruption or the captured state in the Western Balkans is no better than the one in Ukraine. For more than a decade, the term that best describes the state of these relations has been stabilitocracy, which is equidistant from democracy and membership in the European Union. A return to competition in Europe requires consolidating efforts to complete the process of European unification within the European Union and demarcation of its borders.

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

Certainly, this is an easier task in the context of the Western Balkans than in Ukraine. Nevertheless, an effort should be made to convince societies and elites that a completed community based on the same principles, rights and opportunities consolidates peace in Europe and reduces the possibility of external entities influencing political processes in Europe. Even if not all members are always up to the task of being members of this community.

---

[1]Information of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the tasks of Polish foreign policy in 2024, available at: https://www.gov.pl/web/libia/informacja-ministra-spraw-zagranicznych-o-zadaniach-polskiej-polityki-zagranicznej-w-2024-r

[2] Senate: Szłapka: preparations for the Polish presidency of the EU Council are going according to the calendar, Local Government Portal, 24.07.2024

https://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/senat-szlapka-przygotowania-do-polskiej-prezydencji-w-radzie-ue-ida-zgodnie-z-kalendarzem,559220.html

[3] Anastasakis, O. (2008) ‘The EU’s political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach’, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 8(4): 365–377.

[4] Fragmentary ECFR surveys published in December 2023 indicate that there is no clear majority support for membership of any of the candidate countries. Mared Gwyn Jones, Public opinion split on EU enlargement as leaders gear up for crunch decisions, Euronews, 12.12.2023, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/12/12/public-opinion-split-on-eu-enlargement-as-leaders-gear-up-for-crunch-decisions

[5] See. Judgment of the Criminal Code of 5 May 2020, file ref. no. 2 BvR 859/15, 2 BvR1651/15, 2 BvR 2006/15, 2 BvR 980/16, ECLI:DE:BverfG:2020:rs20200505.2bvr085915; Magdalena Baińczyk, Commentary on the judgment of the Criminal Code of 5 May 2020 on ECB bonds, Studia Prawnicze. Dissertations and Materials 2020, No. 2 (27), pp.257-271

[6] Support for Serbia’s membership in the EU is declining. “Pro-Russian sympathies are growing”, Bankier.pl, 30.04.2024,

Materiał pobrany ze strony Instytutu Sobieskiego, sobieski.org.pl[autor].

https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Spada-poparcie-dla-czlonkostwa-Serbii-w-UE-Prorosyjskie-sympatie-rosna-8738495.html

[7] Hungary is blocking billions for Poland. Kaczyński reacted, WP Wiadomości, 11.07.2024 https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/wegry-blokuja-miliardy-dla-polski-kaczynski-zareagowal-7047949117201312a

---

dr Spasimir Domaradzki – Ph.D. in Political Sciences (2007), researcher and lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies of the University of Warsaw. Wilbur Fellow scholar (2008), multiple OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) election observer. Expert member in the Presidential Expert Programme “Laboratory of Ideas” implemented by the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland (2013-2014), member of the editorial team of Res Publica Nowa. Visegrad Insight Fellow (2019-2020). Member of Team Europe at the Representation of the European Commission in Warsaw.

The article was created as part of the project entitled “Dual voices of experts in international affairs: Poland and Hungary” implemented by the Sobieski Institute, grant no.: DOF-K/IF/RD12/15/2024. The grantee is the Waclaw Felczak Institute for Polish-Hungarian Cooperation.

The publication reflects only the views of the author(s) and cannot be associated with the official position of the Wacław Felczak Polish-Hungarian Cooperation Institute.