***The future of the EU: preparing the ground for future enlargement***

September 11, 2023

**The main outcomes**

On September 11, 2023, the Institute of International Relations and Political Science held a second discussion focused on the upcoming EU‘s enlargement processes and the impact which it will make EU-wise and globally. Experts from Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Croatia, Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Denmark joined together in Vilnius to debate the homework needed to be done both by the EU Member States and by the Candidate states before the enlargement, as well as possible institutional changes it may prompt.

The main outcomes of the discussion are as follow:

* The EU needs to decide **whether the next enlargement will be gradual or will it be the new *Big Bang*** (as a reference to the 2004 enlargement). This decision will draw the line between a speedy integration of the candidate states all at once and the gradual, case-by-case integration of each candidate with reference to the fulfillment of the Copenhagen Criteria.
* **Merit-based accession processes are to be ensured despite the geopolitical circumstances**. The recent geopolitical shifts created momentum for the EU and other like-minded states to react which resulted in strengthening cohesion with many candidate states. However, these circumstances shall not be the sole reason for the candidates’ accession to the EU as the required reforms, among which ensuring the rule of law is of particular importance, remain necessary for a swift EU membership.
* **Candidate states should be highly aligned with EU policies before becoming Member States**. As discussions on unanimity and a need for a mutual understanding amongst Member States are ensuing, there is a wide apprehension that the more aligned the new members are in terms of policy and values, the faster the decision-making processes will be able to transpire.
* There is a **pressing need for strategic communication on the future accession of new countries** in the EU. We need to prepare our societies and businesses for possible challenges. It is evident that with the EU enlargement and the integration of the new markets as well as society, the architecture of the current EU budget, payments, free movement of labor and other important areas will need to pass through alterations which may affect current EU citizens. It is therefore needed to initiate a dialogue with the EU population on the importance of the accession of the candidate states and the benefits it will bring. The support of society will be the key to successfully ratifying the membership of the candidates when the time is due.
* **There is no need for Treaty change before the enlargement**, instead, it is **essential for the EU to be ready to welcome new members** in terms of reviewing a wide range of policy areas. Treaty change would be a lengthy and challenging process which might postpone the next accession steps. If there is a need to adjust the legal framework, this process could be done in parallel after the political decision of the enlargement process has been made. However, the EU must assess and resolve certain policy areas (e.g., agriculture, budget, EP seats, etc.) to ensure frictionless effectiveness both for the current MS and the future members.
* Regarding reforms, **a profound discussion on the need of the Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in such areas as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) is currently taking place**. On the one hand, QMV could allow groups of Member States to engage in certain policy areas. However, such engagement can already be seen through initiatives such as PESCO. In addition, although QMV was enforced in more areas, the activation of the *Emergency Brake* would yield similar results as with the unanimity voting. The very adoption of the QMV would also require a unanimous vote which makes such a decision improbable.