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“Ukraine's road to the EU in the light of Polish experience”

Panel: Welcome Ukraine? Navigating Ukraine's Accession to the EU

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In 1989 Poland has embarked on a long process of transition to democracy and market economy. At the same time, successive governments, regardless of their political colors spared no efforts to anchor Poland in the NATO and European Union.

We used the chance that every generation has to change the course of our history. All new democracies in central and Eastern Europe had made their choice - return to Europe. It did not happen overnight, it was a lengthy process, with its ups and downs, steered and coordinated by politicians, but engaging all levels of governance, all economic and social stakeholders, as well as civil society.

Today, when we reflect on Ukraine's accession to the EU, we all recall how fundamental it was for Poland to follow at the same time a path of double transition - to democracy and market economy and to becoming part of NATO and EU. That was the time when politics appeared as Aristotle's common good rather than a technique of manipulating society by populist nationalistic forces as we see it now.

Like today, in 1990s there was a divided world around us, with a lot of uncertainties. There were new states that fell in love with democracy and started practicing it, but there were as well assertive regimes of autocrats and dictators of all sorts. We knew then and we know now that in this deeply polarized world even the biggest countries cannot effectively cope with global risks and threats that do not respect borders.

For all of us in Europe, sovereignty means the ability to achieve our strategic goals and we know only too well that outside the EU such ability is not conceivable.

Nearly 20 years after EU accession, Poland's place on this planet continues to be in the European Union, united, active and assertive in shaping the world, and capable of building international alliances of like minded, democratic countries.

As I come from Poland, you will not be surprised if I say that today with Putin's aggression on Ukraine we understand that we must not allow our politicians in power to squander our great opportunity of belonging to the world of democracy, for which governments, regions, local communities, civil society, schools, universities, people of art and many others had fought for decades.

Poland's accession to the European Union was first of all a political process of huge strategic importance.

Economically, it was both a challenge and unprecedented opportunity. But it was as well as never experienced administrative effort for a country with no tradition of civil service, of coordination and sharing, with dominant vertical structures, low salaries and low social position of those employed in public administration.

When we applied for membership in 1994, my first task was to establish a fit for purpose institutional architecture at the government level. We built an administrative machinery based on the inspiration from the French system of inter institutional coordination.

What we built in 1996 became for years a fundamental structure for coordinating the entire process, with all hands across all levels of public administration on the deck.

But I can tell you that it would not have worked so well if we did not succeed to wake up among all those involved a sense of public mission and emotional engagement, the feeling of ownership and responsibility for this epochal public good of joining the European family of democratic states.

I am spending so much time on administration because it is a fundamental factor in the accession process and also during the membership.

Teams of lawyers, translators and interpreters were set up, centers of information and documentation were established, research centers were mobilized, training for experts on European policies had to be launched, media were involved in a huge scale communication campaign, teachers started to voluntarily provide European education, civil society organizations were massively engaged.

Working in close partnership with European Commission, which provided help basically on everything, establishing cooperation with administrations of other

member states were also of key importance as at that time not all EU member states kept their arms open for that big bang enlargement of 2004.

In short, I would say that preparing for accession meant leaving no stone unturned.

In this maze, finding a common good, the interest of Poland, was not only a political, economic and social effort, it was as well an intellectual and emotional one. And there were sectorial and partisan interests. For some circles these vested interests took precedence.

In Poland, unlike in other candidate countries there was in the Parliament an anti European opposition. In this context, meeting and talking about Europe with local communities, village leaders, teachers, students was actually a pleasure. Confidence and hope prevailed there.

At that time we did not talk about fake news, but one could hear a lot of lies about Europe and its integration. In Poland, as you can imagine, I also had to have long conversations with church hierarchy, not only a catholic one. We took bishops to Brussels. Finally, we had the church on the pro European side. That included the Pope.

And we had a referendum. There was of course a special communication effort before the public vote. But the smartest thing we did was to invite people to vote during a two day referendum. It brought a nearly 80% support for the accession.

Now it is all history.

But today again we live in a complex and difficult geopolitical moment. And you probably know that in my home country the dominant narrative of the political forces in power is anti European, to say the least.

A lot of what we have achieved in integrating Poland with the Union is at risk. There is no trace of the previous anti European parties but the ruling one has taken over all their arguments.

As citizens we must not get used to it and pretend we don't hear it.

There is no return to that point in our history when Poland would be alone and defenseless without allies.

Around 90% of Poles want to be part of the European community.

Let me also say that to be a credible supporter of Ukraine's accession, the current Polish government must stop its ideological anti European aberrations.

Today, I see as my duty to share my experience and memories with our Ukrainian friends. I had been doing it before we joined the Union, we even had a joint task force back twenty years ago. I was working with the Ukraine as Commissioner for regional policy, as chair of the EP constitutional affairs committee and recently meeting officials from different Ukrainian institutions. Two weeks from now another meeting will take place.

And I am so positively surprised by the level of engagement, understanding, commitment, by enormous progress made since 1994, when the first partnership agreement was concluded between the EU and Ukraine.

In the case of Poland during the period between our application for membership, presented on the 8 April 1994 to the Greek presidency and the accession on the 1 may 2004 there has been a huge distance in terms of our institutional and economic preparedness, also a lot remains to be done on the Ukrainian side and, last but not least, the Union must get itself prepared.

Of course the Putin's aggression has generated a powerful destruction of many elements of Ukraine's existence. And it is heartbreaking to see in this context, on Ukrainians' side, enormous determination, political readiness and enthusiasm about the EU accession.

This engagement has been deferred for years. But it is there.

I have always been convinced that enlargement policy is the most important and effective EU policy, enlarging the democratic space and peace on our continent, must be more offensive and faster.

Now, when we are all moving to a different world globally, we must give a hard look to the way the EU implements the enlargement policy.

Treaty changes would facilitate the enlargement, like it was with the Niece Treaty in the context of 2004 enlargement.

Ukraine will be the fifth largest country in the EU.

So, yes, we must look anew at decision making process in the Union.

We must strengthen the EU rule of law competences and mechanisms of its enforcement. We must look at the budgetary system and the way we finance our expenditures. A lot has happened in this field in recent years. The composition of the Commission has to be put back on the table for discussion. The same refers to the veto power. The discussion on Treaty changes have always been and will be difficult. However, after the Conference on the future of Europe politicians cannot use any more the famous excuse that citizens do not want Treaty changes. Still some leaders successfully block launching the process of Treaty change.

The geopolitical European community proposed by the French President for a continent wide political cooperation is important but cannot be seen as alternative to membership.

In this context it is worth mentioning that accession to the EU does normally imply transition periods, derogations or limited access to certain policy instruments. Poland had transition periods in eight areas: competition, transport, employment, services, free movement of capital, energy, environment, taxation - in total we had special solutions on 43 matters in 12 out of 31 negotiation chapters implying not having full rights and duties as of 1 May, 2004. And I will not bore you with details on opt-outs and derogations of other member states, including common currency and Schengen system.

I can also tell you that when it comes to agriculture we are still far from full direct payments, and during negotiations there were issues related to production limits regarding milk, sugar, potatoes starch.

Of course Ukraine is a different candidate country than Poland. And every candidate becomes a member on its own merits.

Some say we did not have oligarchs and related distortions. Others underline we were never a part of USSR with all ideological and political consequences. Still, I can tell you we had big public debates about homo sovieticus in Poland.

Our political systems are different, in Ukraine it is presidential, ours is parliamentary-cabinet one. In the EU there are unitary states, federations, regionalized states. But political system is not among Copenhagen criteria, neither is the level of development.

It is true that Ukraine is not in NATO and Poland joined the NATO five years before the EU accession. It is important to remember that both European and transatlantic communities are firmly rooted in the same set of values. Ukraine has borders internationally recognized and it is a unified jurisdiction.

Of course, accession is not only about closing negotiation chapters, crucial as it is. Implementation and enforcement is what matters most. Ensuring the political and institutional capability to enforce reforms, commitments, being reliable, accountable, credible when it comes to preparation and membership is crucial. Trust matters strongly.

What, I believe, Ukraine and Poland share is what matters most which is human capital. Incredibly talented, ambitious, well educated young generation is what Poland brought into the Union and what Ukraine is already doing.

Together we must ensure that reconstruction of Ukraine will not be about bringing back the prewar Ukraine. With green and high tech infrastructure and economy, the Ukraine will have a chance for leapfrogging to the new different world.

Ukrainians know very well that they must be well-prepared to be capable to benefit from the accession. We learnt from our own accession that if you are not prepared, you cannot benefit from the EU single market. And, I think, it is well taken by the Ukrainians.

One of the best news is that we see Ukraine leaders who understand the need for a deep transformation of the country into a democratic, participatory place, with viable, working institutions of the state and open, competitive, pluralistic political space.

Let me finish looking at the issue from a more global perspective. Ukraine in the EU means an enlarged space of democracy in the world. Ukraine will be a sort of an „inflection” point for regaining ground for democracy in the world.

The contest between democracy and autocracy is a defining challenge of our time. And democracy cannot flinch from that challenge. By having Ukraine within our democratic fold the EU will increase exponentially our chance of winning in that dramatic contest.

Ukraine's accession will also add weight to the global geopolitical projection of the EU. It will change our relations with Russia, independently of who will be in power after Russia loses this war. But it will also make us stronger vis-à-vis China, India and other authoritarian powers. It will firmly embed Ukraine within the structures of a democratic alliance, which would significantly reduce any possibility of external interfering in the affairs of that country. It will give an important security cushion in the region prone to instability.

When at some point we will get with Ukraine into discussions on difficult technical issues, we have to be watchful that they do not obscure what is the most important.

The path for Ukraine is clear. It is Europe. Irrevocably. And it is a bad news, actually a geopolitical and geostrategic nightmare for Mr. Putin.