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“Looking back, Moving Forward: Reflections on Ukraine’s Journey Towards Integration”

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Enlargement policy shows that the EU is a living organism. You can see the open door to further integration both territory and content wise already in the Schuman Declaration. It states that Europe will not be made all at once and announces European solidarity. I see the enlargement as a supreme expression of these intentions.

The EU is always „on the move’. Its history is the one of change. Still, far too often in a reactive way. Also, the tradition of changes to the European treaties has been to codify the past rather than make them fit for the future.

The integrated Europe is a community of law. It has its values cast in stone. You cannot negotiate them; you cannot have your own definitions of the human rights or rule of law. But beyond the common foundation this community of states and citizens has always aimed at integrating the diversity. And this diversity has been a source of progress.

Each of the 7 enlargements impacted the Community. Each of them differently. The Greek, Spanish and Portuguese accession opened it to the South. And these were countries with a non-democratic past.

With the Scandinavian accession the issue of democracy gained a special salience within the EU. Attention was paid to democratic deficit.

The big bang enlargement of 2004 was the most consequential for the future of the EU. We came from the other bank of the river.

For newcomers it was important that this accession went hand in hand with their transition to market economy and democracy.

Europe was a guarantee that the changes would be irreversible. Accession was for us a transformative experience on many levels. It was a light in the tunnel, showing the

direction for change. It resulted in economic growth, increased political stability, and enhanced cooperation across Europe. It facilitated modernization and led to improved living standards and quality of life for our citizens. It opened new educational opportunities.

The 2004 enlargement and the subsequent two: in 2007 when Romania and Bulgaria entered and 2013 when Croatia joined, were different from Western enlargements. Eastern enlargement demonstrated what I would call political courage of the EU.

Countries with much lower level of development entered the single market. People with huge hunger for democracy but also with limited experience of democracy and market economy joined. Their preparatory process was longer and more demanding.

Every generation gets a chance to change the course of history. And we used ours. 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, political and social stakeholders, as well as civil society.

This overwhelming approach converted Eastern enlargement into a massive popular movement. For all of us, not only the very moment of accession mattered. The effort to prepare for it had an enormous added value.

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 populist nationalistic forces to manipulate society as we see it today.

Like today, in 1990s there was a divided world around us, with a lot of uncertainties. There were people 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 newcomers, sovereignty meant then and means today 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 domestic 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 years.

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 a never experienced administrative effort of 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.

On that we needed a cultural switch When we applied for membership in 1994, my first task was to build an administrative machinery based on the inspiration from the French system of inter institutional coordination. We followed as well the idea the French ENA and had developed a national school of public administration (KSAP).

What emerged in 1996 became for years a fundamental structure for coordinating the entire process, bringing 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. For many accessions was also an emotional experience.

Teams of lawyers, translators and interpreters were set up, centres of information and documentation were established, research centres 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. European Commission was a friend.

In addition to working in close partnership with European Commission, which provided help basically on everything, establishing cooperation with administrations of member states was also of key importance as at that time not all EU member states kept their arms open to that big bank enlargement of 2004.

In short, I would say that preparing for accession meant leaving no stone unturned. In this maze of challenges, 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 even precedence.

In Poland, unlike in other candidate countries there was in the Parliament an anti-European opposition, represented by two radical and rather brutal political parties. In this context, meeting and talking about Europe with local communities, village - often female - leaders, teachers, students was actually a pleasure. Confidence and hope prevailed there. And still does.

Parliament was an important institutional and political partner. Initially, cooperation between the government and the Parliament was left to political process, with limited formalities. With time we moved toward law-based relations.

Success of accession depended on the political will to deliver political stability. Parliament was a political platform for this process.

While the political cooperation was key for achieving common outcomes, as well as for providing predictability into accession process, anti-European opposition challenged the process. They represented potential for interinstitutional conflicts.

The political culture of consensus building was gradually consolidated, but even among the pro-European parties criticism toward government, often not substantiated, could be seen. 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.

At that time the Union was engaged in two debates, which today look pretty archaic, though still popping up. I saw the need to ensure that the voice of Poland was heard in those debates. These two debates generated concerns and we read them as efforts to delay the eastern enlargement.

The first one was about widening vs. deepening and concentrated around the readiness of the Union for further enlargements. The preparedness was never defined but as a political tool it worked.

The current discontent, appearing here and there, that Poland and Hungary were admitted to EU too early, is a late spatter of that debate. In my view that debate - to widen or to deepen- , long dormant, was given a final blow by the accession process of Ukraine. It turned out, that in the moment of geopolitical and existential crisis, we are ready, as a geopolitical body, to undertake extraordinary decisions.

And the second debate concerned the so-called finalite politique. Some reduced it to geographical dimension, but art. 49 has always been rather clear. Others focused on institutional shape of European integration. But the pragmatic choice has always been of “step by step” advancement. The debate is still open.

Today again we live in a complex and difficult geopolitical or geostrategic moment. I said before that in my home country the dominant narrative of the political forces in power is anti-European, to say the least.

In my home country, politicians in power in a way squander our opportunity of belonging to the world of democracy. 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 defenceless 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 of Poland's accession with our Ukrainian friends. I had been doing it for years. I will do it in the meeting with a big group of Ukrainian political leaders tomorrow.

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, and in particular during association process.

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 10 years later 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, finally, 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 heart-breaking 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. Now, when we are all moving to a different world globally, we must give a hard look to the

way the EU implements its enlargement policy. Actually I believe we are in midst of this process.

I belong to those who believe that Treaty changes would facilitate the enlargement, like it was with the Nice Treaty in the context of 2004 enlargement. My thanks to prof. Brigid Laffan for her engagement before the second referendum on the Nice Treaty.

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 must 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. And it is not a strong signal to Russia.

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. Some of the transition periods were in response to EU member states, for example regarding free movement of people or some aspects of common agricultural policies. Others were on the Polish request, in particular regarding land acquisition or environmental adjustment.

Still, we joined as a fully-fledged member. And I will not bore you with details on opt-outs and derogations of other member states, including common currency and Schengen system.

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 is a sovereign state, a unified jurisdiction and has borders internationally recognized.

Accession is not only about closing negotiation chapters, crucial as it is. Implementation and enforcement are 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.

If we as the Union manage to ensure that reconstruction of Ukraine will not be about bringing back the pre-war Ukraine, the country 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 also look 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.

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

While I used to consider the enlargement policy as the most important and successful, expanding the space of democracy, making Europe more relevant globally and lifting up millions of Europeans to full membership of our European value-based community of law, as in case of any European policy it is legitimate to ask whether our conservative approach to enlargement makes this policy fit for purpose.

Certainly, the Russian aggression provides an entirely new context for the European security framework and questions European sovereignty in terms of our capability to deliver on our interests. In this context the EU's quick formal endorsement of the Ukraine's candidate status was the only available politically rational response.

We passed the test, but I think many share the view that the Neighbourhood or Eastern Partnership European Policy has been a failure in terms of its achievements. Belarus is a flagship example here. Some would say that neighbourhood policy seized to be a political project, it has been converted into an administrative control of the implementation of lists of measures and commitments. It did not protect our biggest neighbour from atrocities of wild aggression of Putin. And it's not difficult to notice the presence of Russia, China & Turkey in the Western Balkans. Fortunately, Ukrainians have seen the aggression as an attack on democracy and European values. And above all on their continuing commitment to Europeanise their country and their life.

It is legitimate to ask whether today a candidate status, in view of the recent history of enlargements, has sufficient practical relevance. We all know how many years and decades candidate status can last without opening the door for accession negotiations. We also know how deeply rooted is the opposition to further enlargements in some member states. What people have in mind when talking about accelerating Ukraine's accession boils down to shortening bureaucratic procedures which we could see last spring.

Adding to the landscape other countries from the post-Soviet territory and Western Balkans shows the need of a new strategic approach to enlargement. There are some ideas around, mostly looking for alternatives to enlargement, which in my view cannot be seen as a solution. The European Council on Foreign Relations calls for a pragmatic approach called partnership for enlargement as a new way to anchor Ukraine faster and pull Western Balkans and other potential members out of their accession stagnation.

This new membership formula would bring the new member states into a full framework of single market, more generously than association agreements, bringing them into the current grand European projects related to climate, energy and security. It can be seen as a proposal of a selective accession to single market, to energy Union, to climate industrial plan, to emerging new security framework.

Some would have doubts seeing in it the old idea of "everything but institutions" concept of enlargement. I think we must admit that we as the EU are facing a challenge of epochal importance.

Our geopolitical situation has been transformed profoundly and the neighbourhood and enlargement policies need a rewriting because our candidate countries are geopolitically vulnerable, and they continue to have European aspirations. We have to find a way to anchor them in the Union more deeply, rather quickly.

We should make out of the enlargement policy an instrument fit for the current geopolitical environment, which might last for a while, allowing us to stabilise and influence the situation of our partners before China and Russia will offer their values and principles.

It is also true that if you follow closely the cooperation between the Ukrainian government and the Commission there are many additional mini agreements anchoring Ukraine more deeply in a variety of European policies and programs. So, phasing in Ukraine into membership framework is already there, being done in a pragmatic way. Back-to-back consultations are permanent.

There is an updated regularly Action Plan for integrating Ukraine into the internal market. Together with Ukrainians, it will be a market of 490 mln citizens. It includes access to roaming-free zones, inclusion into the single payment area, and strategic partnership on renewables. So, a lot is happening in terms of concrete steps to bring Ukraine closer faster. It is a country at war. They have to do more on anti-corruption measures. There are worries about post war multidimensional lack of stability.

But Russia must get a signal from the EU on how we see our preferred interinstitutional order in Europe, based on freedom and democracy. Putin's imperialism woke us up and confirms that the world is a dangerous place.

Ukrainian accession will be a counterforce to that.