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## Podium Discussion

# 20 Years of EU Enlargement Past, Present, and Future of the Enlargement Process

**Organisation: Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft e.V. / SOG) in cooperation with the German Society for Eastern European Studies (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Osteuropakunde / DGO)**  
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*Report by Sebastian Schulze Bisping, Berlin*

### Opening Remarks

The discussion took place at the German Bundestag in Berlin. *Thomas Hacker*, MP and Vice President of the SOG, opened the event by highlighting the success story of a united European Union post-World War II and the period of division. *Gabriele Freitag*, managing Director of the DGO, echoed his sentiments, emphasizing the overall success of the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements despite some challenges. Currently, the EU is facing new external challenges, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and internal issues, including prolonged accession negotiations with the Western Balkan countries.

### Panel Discussion

The discussion, moderated by *Christian Hagemann*, Executive Director of the SOG, featured international perspectives on the EU and the (potential) membership of Central East and Southeast European countries.

**Polish and Visegrád perspective:** *Wojciech Przybilski*, Editor-in-chief (Visegrád Insight) and president of the Res Publica Foundation, gave an analysis of the EU membership from the Polish perspective and that of the Visegrád countries. He pointed out that 20 years after Poland's accession, no one is in the mood for celebration, mainly due to significant political fluctuations in recent years. Poland, a country that longed for freedom, security, and self-determination through NATO, initially sought economic prosperity as a secondary goal. The Polish society values the advantages of the EU, such as the European internal market. Since the Russian invasion, the focus has shifted strongly back to security. The recent parliamentary elections in Poland were heavily influenced by

European security concerns. The refugee policy crisis of 2014 and 2015 brought the Visegrád countries closer together, emphasizing sovereignty over their borders more than the rest of Europe. However, recent elections have shown a lack of political unity among the Visegrád countries, especially regarding their Ukraine policy.

**Romanian perspective:** *Alina Mungiu-Pippidi*, professor for comparative public policy at Luiss Guido Carli University/Rome analyzed Romania's past, present, and future relationship with the EU. She adapted the famous quote by Adam Michnik (journalist, historian and former dissident) "the worst thing about Communism is what comes after" to "the best of enlargement comes a little bit before." This is because Romania implemented most key reforms shortly before EU accession, aware that failure to join could close the door to the EU for many years. Compared to other new EU members from Central and Eastern Europe, Romania had a unique form of communism with a more independent foreign policy but also severe repression. Romania has been a significant beneficiary of EU membership, with high levels of economic growth and per capita income rapidly approaching that of Hungary. EU funds are also being used to develop infrastructure. *Mungiu-Pippidi* also highlighted the brain drain in Romania due to EU membership, benefiting especially the older EU states.

**North Macedonian perspective:** North Macedonia is an EU candidate country. *Nikola Dimitrov*, diplomat, think tanker, and former Deputy Prime Minister of North Macedonia emphasized that his country has been a candidate for almost 20 years but has been a NATO member

since 2020. There is growing frustration among the population, particularly due to unfulfilled promises of imminent EU membership by leading EU heads of state. The resolution of the name issue with Greece has not led to progress, as political battles with Bulgaria now pose new challenges. The population is losing faith and motivation to join the EU. Dimitrov advocated for reforming the unanimity principle in important EU decisions. Not only does North Macedonia suffer from the veto power of individual countries, but overall unanimity also hinders further integration steps.

**Ukrainian perspective:** Ukraine is also a recent EU candidate country and has been engaged in an armed conflict with Russia since 2014, escalating to a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022. *Viktoriiia Melnyk*, Head of International Relation and European Integration, Centre of Policy and Legal Reform/Kyjiw, stated that it is difficult to discuss formal EU accession matters during an ongoing war. Despite the

conflict, Ukraine remains the most optimistic country regarding EU membership, with about 84 percent of the population wanting to join the EU. Ukraine has already paid a high price for its freedom, and the pro-EU sentiment is not expected to change. Reforms are seen as beneficial for the country itself, not just to meet EU requirements.

### Conclusion

The different perspectives of each country on their EU accession or potential membership were highlighted in this discussion. Each country has its own history, and transformation is a non-linear process that can vary significantly. Corruption has been the most important problem for most countries in the past and might remain so for some time in the future. The “Big Bang” EU enlargement 20 years ago and the smaller subsequent enlargements are broadly viewed as successful steps toward further European integration. Open questions with EU candidate countries need to be addressed.