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Impact of the Future Enlargement(s) on Czechia, Poland and Central Europe

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Summary

- States of the CEE region adopt divergent attitudes towards the project of the eastward enlargement. Despite Poland and Czechia being considered favourable to accepting new members, such a simple point of view should be rejected. In both cases, serious discrepancies between the governmental rhetoric and changeable public opinion exist.

- In the Czech case, the communication between political stakeholders and citizens is seriously neglected within topics of enlargement and assistance to Ukraine itself, especially as far as financial costs for Czechia are concerned. The general anti-Russian mood present in the society is apparently not a sufficient motivation for developing massive support for the enlargement, most notably towards Ukraine.

- The political representation of Czechia lacks a united strategy to navigate through the field of foreign and European policy. The current support for enlarging the Union might come to an end when the new government, possibly a right-wing populist one, is formed.

- Warsaw holds the enlargement project as a means of self-defence of its frontiers. The local higher rate of public support than in Czechia seems logical at this stage as well as the non-prioritizing of the Western Balkans.

- In Poland, the lack of public discussion on the topic of the economic impacts of the enlargement is felt. Such an information vacuum, accentuated by bilateral tensions between Kyiv and Warsaw (importing cheaper agricultural goods from Ukraine, Volhynia massacre, the loss of net-recipient position) creates fertile ground for distrust and grudge. Such sentiments are misused by populist political stakeholders such as PiS.

- Both countries might play a complementary role while focusing on assistance to the Western Balkans and the Eastern European candidates. In order to maintain the role of policy-shapers it is necessary to put forward the vision of sustainable integration of candidate states and reach at least partial unification of the public opinion.

Policy recommendations

→ The Czech Republic and Poland should establish regular dialogue within a new working group dedicated to enlargement where both partners should share their know-how and gained knowledge of the process so far. The traditionally stronger focus and good reputation of Czechia among the Western Balkan countries should well match with the Polish strength and deeper knowledge of Eastern Europe.

→ Based on the bilateral consultations, Czechia and Poland should more extensively invest in the TAIEX and Twinning programmes supported by the European Commission to share their capacity and know-how on enlargement on the state-to-state level. The absorption capacity gap is one of the most obvious problems of the candidate countries.

→ Czechia together with Poland should establish a group of Friends of Enlargement to Eastern Europe and attempt to balance the EU's approach to the Western Balkans which have received a lot of support and resources in the past. It is also necessary that both partners build a new narrative about how both regions are interconnected and vulnerable in the case of non-action from the EU side, which could help pressure the lukewarm actors.

→ Fulfilling the domestic homework, Czechia and Poland should strive to shape the overall framework of enlargement policy at the EU level, including the EU methodology of enlargement, and in this way contribute to achieving a higher level of flexibility at the same time as sticking to transparent and merit-based processes for both Eastern Europe and Western Balkan countries.

→ It is necessary, especially in the case of Czechia, to build a stronger societal momentum and public support for enlargement since a substantial part of the society is not necessarily in favour, especially in the case of Ukraine. A similar situation might emerge in Poland, either related to historical grievances or financial contributions to the EU budget, which is going to reverse for both Poland and Czechia in the coming years.

→ Both Czechia and Poland should invest in political consensus-building and in establishing a more solid cross-party national consensus on future relations vis-à-vis key partners in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans since the issue of enlargement goes beyond a single government's mandate and requires a longer-term strategic approach.

→ A-whole-of-society-approach to this issue is needed since there are high risks of one part of the stakeholders turning against the candidate county(ies), which could undermine the whole domestic debate and strategic national interests. A regional approach to this could further help facilitate difficult discussions and manage to establish common ground.

Introduction

The impacts of a future enlargement of the EU as a political topic resonates particularly within Central and Eastern European (CEE) Member States. The potential accession of candidate countries in their vicinity places them in the role of close partner, and sometimes even mentor, whose influence and know-how may be important.

The ideological disintegration of the Visegrad Group caused by major differences in attitude towards the Kremlin has put Czechia and Poland on the same side of the fence as supporters of both enlargements towards the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. However, Prague and Warsaw also face challenges and incertitudes, which may overshadow the idealistic superficial appearance of their positive attitude. Stressing the argument of enhancing collective security is relevant and justifies prioritising several candidates at the expense of others. The Polish and Czech deterrence of Russia's imperialism also stands as a reason for hesitation on speeding up cooperation with certain Western Balkan candidates considered Russian advocates. The same reason intensifies the grounds for supporting Moldova, who is exposed to severe Russian pressure and Georgia's civil society where the ruling political elite is decoupling with the West and is approximating to Russia. Concurrently, looking beyond security, both EU countries face a divergence of governmental and public rhetoric. Such an issue is visible especially in the case of Ukraine, whose accession is often viewed as creating a barrier between Central Europe and Russia but at the same time the opinion is growing among the EU population that Ukraine, especially in terms of its post-war reconstruction, may stand as a huge economic burden for the EU[1]. The influence of populist political representation is not negligible in Poland or Czechia. The accession political agenda, primarily regarding Ukraine, is regularly exploited in the political discussion, especially in the context of refugee fatigue burdening the economy (Czechia and Poland) as well as historical wrongs and disputes (Poland). Elements like cultural proximity, a common past, shared statehood or a great share of expats living on the Czech and Polish territories might not necessarily only serve as positives for the enlargement project, at least when perceived by certain parts of these societies.

First and foremost, the enlargement of the EU presents a challenge for all stakeholders to find common ground in resolving economic incompatibilities regarding the access the candidates have to the EU single market and in mollifying social tensions originating from insecurities of Polish and Czech citizens regarding the potential loss of EU funds reoriented to poorer newcomer states.

Thus, this paper tries to explore the Czech and Polish perspective on the topic, discover synergies and discrepancies between both actors, and contributes with ideas for potential cooperation in relation to them both. The authors also see an opportunity in the upcoming Polish EU presidency which could play a positive role in bringing the enlargement debate forward, in particular in relation to Eastern Europe, and provide an opportunity for the CEE region again to serve as a force for good.

The policy paper is divided into two main parts outlining the Czech and Polish perspectives, followed by a final chapter dedicated to the potential synergies and obstacles for potential increased cooperation and working towards shared goals and interests in the EU's enlargement debate. The paper is also synchronised with another policy document focused on future visions of enlargement, thus it forgoes highlighting the future perspectives of the policy development on the EU27 side as such.

[1] Opinion, Moods and Preferences of European Citizens,"The War and the Vote", 14 February 2024, https://eupinions.eu/de/text/the-war-and-the-vote.

1 Situational awareness

1.1 Czechia

Czechia's approach to enlargement can be characterised as long-term optimistic and ambitious in its expectations as well as in the final goal, which it sees as the EU's expansion towards Eastern Europe as well as the region of Western Balkans.[2] Thus, during 2022 and 2023, the country welcomed[3] the granting of candidate status or the speeding up of negotiations towards it with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, even if it critically assessed the future perspectives of the latter two countries, mainly in terms of sticking to the merits-based process and alignment with the EU values and principles.

Over nearly the past three years, but particularly within the last 12 months, the country has invested some resources into exploring the possible consequences of enlargement on its own development in different sectoral policies in order to have the domestic part of the debate accomplished while focusing on negotiations with other EU members and institutions. In this process, spearheaded by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all line ministries of the government as well as non-state actors and international partners, sociological agencies or think-tanks were involved exploring numerous options, impacts and models of future enlargement. Nevertheless, the results of these surveys and research initiatives were rarely published and openly discussed with the public. That only illustrates the discrepancy between the government's approach on the one hand and the broad consensus of public opinion, and also part of the elite,[4] which tends to be critical and follows the trend also visible within the older EU members, on the other hand.

Thus, it is the public part of the policy-making process, which seems to be one of the weakest parts of the Czech approach towards EU enlargement policy. For example, the spring Standard Eurobarometer conducted in April 2024 showed that only 37% of Czechs supported granting Ukraine candidate status (and 57% were against), while it was almost double that at 65 out of 100 Poles. Much higher numbers could be observed in relation to other countries of the CEE region, including Hungary, the Baltic states or Croatia.[5] This issue probably has a lot to do with the fact that while Czechia, especially after 24 February 2022, deepened their antagonism against Russia, it did not necessarily translate into a pro-Ukrainian position particularly when it comes to financial and military support.[6] Concurrently, it remains unclear what the political consequences to the government might be of explaining the costs and benefits of enlargement to society at large, particularly as it remains divided on many issues related to the EU and its policies, even if the approach to Ukraine, Russia and more generally geopolitics remains rather consensual.

[2] The government has also never rejected and publicly condemned the attempts of Turkey to join the EU.

[3] Petr Pavel, "Vítám rozhodnutí Evropské rady", *@prezidentpavel on X*, 14 December 2024, https://x.com/prezidentpavel/status/1735400354601164845.

[4] Pavlína Janebová, Trends of V4 States' Policies in Eastern Europe, Association for International Affairs, https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/AMO_Trends_2022_web.pdf.

[5] Standard Eurobarometer 101 - Spring 2024, "Czechia", May 2024, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3216.

[6] STEM, "Hodnocení vztahu občanů české republiky k vybraným zemím Evropy a světa během války na Ukrajině, 11 November 2022, https://www.stem.cz/hodnoceni-vztahu-obcanu-ceske-republiky-k-vybranym-zemim-evropy-a-sveta-behem-valky-na-ukrajine/.

1.2 Poland

Poland belongs to a group of EU Member States which are often described as friends or even enthusiasts of enlargement. The accession of new Member States enjoys huge public support.[7] However, there is a substantial difference concerning the importance of various candidate states in the agenda of the Polish foreign policy which is related to the impact of their possible accession on the Polish national interest and perceptions of its implications. As far as further enlargement is concerned, Ukraine occupies the first place regarding its relevance for Poland. The European bids of Moldova and Georgia – also because of their location in the Eastern Partnership - are perceived in Poland as more significant than the Western Balkans. Finally, Poland sees Turkey's accession process as frozen, most probably for ever. As far as finalité of the enlargement and its geopolitical consequences are concerned, Poland foresees the accession of neighbouring Belarus after a change of regime and of Armenia one day. This should be interpreted as an attempt to transform Poland from a frontline country into a member surrounded by other EU states (excluding Kaliningrad Oblast) and a permanent eradication of Russia's imperial grip on power. On the other hand, the Polish political elite and most of society regard rather negatively the idea of conditioning of further enlargement by internal institutional reforms within the EU (qualified majority voting).

Until 2022, Poland and the Polish society had been supportive of enlargement towards the Western Balkans but without a strong social and political ownership. Consequently, the Polish debate on the impact of further enlargement was limited and rather superficial. The Polish enlargement debate changed dramatically since Moldova, Georgia and particularly Ukraine received candidate status in 2022. Today, this debate is decisively more intense. Ukraine plays a key role in the Polish enlargement debate. Certainly, the impact of Ukraine's accession will be discussed very extensively in the next years in Poland. This discussion will shape to a large degree the attitude of the Polish political elite and society towards enlargement as such. Moreover, a positive outcome of the Polish discussion on Ukrainian accession should not be taken for granted, which makes this issue even more relevant.

[7] In the most recent Standard Eurobarometer (101) published in May 2024 almost 65 % of Poles declared support for the further enlargement and 25 % were against. The same or slightly higher approval was observed only in six EU Member States (Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Spain). As far as the positive attitude to the accession of new states is concerned, the Poles distinguish themselves against the EU's average (51 % for). Moreover, the approach of Polish citizens towards the enlargement has improved in recent months. Poles expressed the strongest endorsement of Ukraine's membership (almost 75 % for and over 20 % against).

2 Lessons for Polish-Czech cooperation

2.1 Reflections and limits of Poland

Poland praises itself as a key supporter of further enlargement among the EU Member States, however, the devil remains in the details. Future enlargement, in the Polish case, is strongly identified with Ukraine. On the one hand, Polish relations with Kyiv are cemented by the bilateral community of interests with regards to Russia posing a fundamental threat to the independence and security of both countries. On the other, they are marred with bilateral problems and tensions (imported Ukrainian goods, the status of Ukrainian migrants and refugees in Poland, clashing interpretations of a difficult history), which may hamper the Ukrainian accession process. For instance, key Polish politicians (government and opposition) have already stated that Poland should precondition Ukraine's accession to the EU on its acceptance of the Polish position on disputed historical and economic issues. This approach enjoys wide societal approval.

A comprehensive and in-depth discussion on the impact of the future enlargement on the Polish economy and society has not started and it should be launched as soon as possible because this issue can be easily hijacked by nationalist politicians or mismanaged by populists from the mainstream political parties, who could blackmail the government on this issue by demanding that it defend national interests. However, the Polish public institutions in cooperation with the civil society, expert community and academia have not prepared any reports that evaluate the exact impacts of the enlargement on Poland.[8] Moreover, knowledge about the impacts of the accession of new Member States has not been disseminated among Polish society to maintain a high societal support for the enlargement in the future.

The present positive attitude of Poland and the Poles towards enlargement may weaken after 2027 due to Poland's possible transformation from net recipient of EU funds into net contributor. If hard and soft far right parties win the next national elections, their negative opinion on the benefits associated with Poland's EU membership as such may have a negative spillover on the general societal approach towards the enlargement ("the cake is too small for all").

Poland might slow down enlargement by opposing the idea of correlation between the accession of new countries and preceding institutional reforms which is promoted by key EU Member States including Germany. Finally, Law and Justice (PiS)' supportive attitude towards enlargement might decrease considerably if the candidate countries cooperate closely with Germany, which is perceived by Kaczynski's party as a key threat to Poland's sovereignty and national interests.

There is a rising awareness in Poland of the interdependence of the enlargements to the Western Balkans and to the Eastern Partnership.[9] However, there is still huge room for improvement. In fact, both enlargements should be treated as one process, which concerns one geopolitical area stretching from the Adriatic Sea through the Balkans to the Caucasus and centred around the Black Sea. This perception is based - despite significant differences - on key common cultural and historical traditions (for instance, the heritage of Ancient Greece and the Roman,

[8] These reports should focus especially on the creation of the synergy between the enlargement (particularly for Ukraine) and Poland's economic development and modernization of various sectors of their economies. Both processes should be placed in a wider regional and pan-European context.

[9] Radosław Sikorski in his expose stated the enlargements towards the East and the Western Balkans constitute mutually reinforcing processes. Informacja Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w 2024 r., Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 25.04.2024, https://www.gov.pl/web/libia/informacja-ministra-spraw-zagranicznych-o-zadaniach-polskiej-polityki-zagranicznej-w-2024-r.

Byzantine and Ottoman Empires).[10] The redefinition of the geopolitical map of Europe by Poland would require new innovative thinking, which poses a huge challenge because of the domination of Eastern Europe on the Polish mental map. The common border with Belarus, which is associated with many common social, economic, cultural and historical issues only enhances this perspective. However, Poland should be prepared that unfortunately the scenario of Belarus' gradual de facto incorporation into the Russian Federation seems to be more probable than Minsk's pivot to the EU.

2.2 Reflections and limits of Czechia

Similarly to Poland, there are real dangers that this government's approach to enlargement might fail to lay a course for future sustainability and de facto end with a potential change of government in autumn 2025, which represents a key challenge for the predictability of the Czech approach.

As stated above, the whole process is strongly driven by the current government and ruling elite without stronger roots in the society or among the wider political class, including the main opposition force ANO of former PM Andrej Babiš who usually does not focus on the foreign policy and security portfolio.[11] Therefore, it could fall victim to coalition negotiations when being offered to a junior government partner, possibly coming from the extreme (right or left) parts of the political spectrum.

Therefore, what would make sense is to attempt to build a broader consensus among key foreign and security policy actors, including a balanced approach to enlargement towards Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, possibly facilitated by the country's president Petr Pavel who has already attempted to build bridges within the broader FP portfolio in the past.[12]

At the same time, it will be necessary to work with the acquired knowledge and expertise on the process within the government and prepare the society for the next development and necessary course of events, on which the government with some notable exceptions[13] resigned until today. Without stronger consensus within the society and an increased support for enlargement, especially regarding the crucial actors such as Ukraine, there will be no public appetite and demand for solutions delivered by the government.

However, it is necessary to realise that a closer integration of Ukraine within the EU's Single Market will require national solutions, possibly including long transition periods in certain areas – including – for example - agricultural goods – or limits on the freedom of movement of labour, even if this has so far benefitted the Czech economy to a high degree. If a certain consensus is not established across the party line, there are high risks that Czechia might back down in its support, especially towards Ukraine, since at least part of its interests clash with the business portfolio

[10] This redefinition will require the increase of awareness on the rising role of Turkey in the Balkans, Black Sea region and the Caucasus and preparing the Polish response to these developments.
[11] Petr Honzejk, Mlčení Andreje Babiše, *HN.cz*, 3 March 2015, https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-63623010-mlceni-andreje-babise.
[12] iDnes.cz, „Prezident jednal s Fialou a Babišem o míru a o roli Číny ve válce na Ukrajině", *ČTK*, 25 June 2024, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/babis-pavel-fiala-jednani-hrad-havlicek.A240625_094428_domaci_mul.
[13] Martin Dvořák, „Další krok na cestě Ukrajiny a Moldavska do Unie", Instagram account, https://www.instagram.com/p/C8eS3IqotaH/.

of the leader of the opposition Andrej Babiš who has already publicly criticised the import of Ukraine's goods,[14] as he did before with Polish products in the past.[15]

Without achieving some kind of elementary consensus within the Czech political elite, the country cannot and will not play a more important role at the EU level. Instead it could be sidelined by other players – including Poland or also Germany, France and others – who could determine the pace of the process, political priorities as well as the overall European framework for the next steps to happen. To overcome that, Czech diplomacy needs to play a much more proactive and assertive role at the EU level and help shape a new consensus around the enlargement process now.[16] One concrete idea is to establish a Group of Friends of Enlargement that would focus on Eastern Europe and balance the approach of some of the EU members almost solely focused on the Western Balkans, which fits neither the Czech, nor the Polish national interests in this area.

However, there needs to be a solid analysis of the enlargement process and its consequences by other of Czechia's closest partners, including most notably Poland, without which the partnership might be in vain. This is particularly important once the process starts and the accession of the next candidate country draws closer, since national prerogatives, exceptions and/or vetoes might emerge, as it is possible to observe regarding the Western Balkans, for example, with Bulgaria, Greece or Croatia already today.[17] And it is necessary to admit that this practice has always been part of the bigger process and without changing its roots and methodology, it is impossible to avoid.

[14] Jan Tvrdoň, „Babiš na videu s kohoutem označil ukrajinské obilí za kontaminované. „Na hraně šíření poplašné zprávy," reaguje ministr", *Deník N*, 4 March 2024, https://denikn.cz/1368380/babis-na-videu-s-kohoutem-oznacil-ukrajinske-obili-za-kontaminovane-na-hrane-sireni-poplasne-zpravy-reaguje-ministr/.

[15] iRozhlas.cz, „Že mám něco proti vašim potravinám? To je recyklovaná fake news, řekl Babiš pro polský deník", 26 October 2018, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/rozhovor-andrej-babis-denik-gazeta-prawna-polsko-polske-potraviny-striptyz-euro_1810261130_haf.

[16] Tvořímeevropu.cz, „Doporučení Národního konventu o EU: Budoucnost politiky rozšiřování v kontextu institucionálního nastavení", *National Convention on the EU*, 1 July 2024, https://tvorimevropu.cz/2024/07/01/doporuceni-narodniho-konventu-o-eu-budoucnost-politiky-rozsirovani-v-kontextu-institucionalniho-nastaveni/.

[17] Krassen Nikolov, „Bulgaria will stick to conditions for North Macedonia's EU membership talks", *Euractiv*, 9 April 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgaria-will-stick-to-conditions-for-north-macedonias-eu-membership-talks/.

Conclusions

The domestic debates about enlargement and its consequences for Czechia, Poland as well as the rest of the CEE region are at very different levels of readiness to act in favour of the process and pursue the next steps for the integration of individual countries, which in turn determines the preparedness of individual countries to play a more active role within the policy negotiations. One of the reasons for this is that the next wave of enlargement, or even any single country's readiness for the final step, is still very far away, and lies outside of the classic political four-year-long-cycle and planning of the countries' ruling elites.

At the same time, this discussion – closely connected to the future of Europe type of dialogue – is going to determine the EU's nature and internal as well as external relations of the block, which is of key importance for the eastern flank nations of the EU. And even if the essence of the enlargement policy has certainly been revived by the Russian aggression against Ukraine over the past two and half years, it is still far from determined in which direction and with which consequences the war is going to impact individual Member States or even the Union as such.

The traditional supporters of closer relations with countries of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans, among which Poland and Czechia certainly belong, display a high level of fragmentation and diverging priorities, including when focusing on the two regions. This represents a challenge as well as an opportunity stemming from the new mandate of the European Commission and European Parliament that might give it new energy and geopolitical spin. However, what will be necessary is the driving force behind these processes composed of Member States having a clear vision of their next steps, evaluated impacts on their own economies and society, as well as transparently articulated and communicated demands and red lines for both the partner countries and fellow members of the EU too.

Both Czechia and Poland can play a positive role as policy-shapers and drivers of the agenda, conditioned by their domestic homework fulfilled, consensus built and sustainability going beyond individual government terms secured, which is far from given now.

However, if these conditions are in place, both actors can contribute to finding a new balance and leadership on the enlargement policy, determine both their own national as well as European rules of the game and quicken the pace of progress of the candidate countries themselves. Especially if the countries themselves do not become veto players as has already started happening in the region of Western Balkans and the surrounding EU members where usually neighbours of the external partners of the EU have begun demanding numerous conditions and prerequisites for the enlargement to even start, in most cases.

Therefore, there is a substantial space for Czechia and Poland to exchange know-how on which the Czechs have some advantages since their governmental focus on the policy has been in place for a longer period and has already started filling some of the white space on the policy map. In any case, a comprehensive policy review is a necessary start for determination of the national lines, and from there to move on into a more proactive position in the EU27.

Both partners can also complement each other in the two regions since Czechia has invested a lot of resources in the region of Western Balkans, while Poland's traditional priority has lain with the East of Europe. Combining both into a more comprehensive approach to both regions and creating a new narrative of why this should be the EU priority for the years to come could be brought and delivered together, as the example of the Polish-Greek initiative for the European sky shield

illustrates.18 However, overcoming political differences and partners' own blind spots and taboos, including historical memory issues or domestic populist debate, is a necessary precondition for the systemic change to happen.

In any case, Poland will need allies, and Czechia might become a trusted one, especially based on the depth of bilateral partnership and the fact that Polish hands will be to some degree tied due to the upcoming EU presidency starting on 1 January 2025. This will provide a good opportunity to restart the EU's approach to enlargement with the new mandate of the European Commission and Parliament but also a crucial moment when things need to happen after the time not spent on the portfolio within the current Hungarian term.

[18] Reuters, "Poland and Greece urge EU to create common air shield, says Polish PM", 23 May 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-greece-urge-eu-create-common-air-shield-says-polish-pm-2024-05-23/.

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