

REPORT

15 years in the EU: What have we learned?

Monday 20th of May 2019
Prague House Brussels

- The panel discussion titled “15 years in the EU: What have we learned?” was organised by the Think Visegrad platform (represented by EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy) in cooperation with the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU and the Delegation of Prague to the EU and took place on Monday, May 20 2019. The event was hosted in the Prague House Brussels. It commemorated the 15th anniversary of the accession of (not only) Central European countries to the EU.
- The debate reflected on achievements of the EU enlargement for both Central Europe and the EU as a whole and brought forward the future perspectives of those countries within the EU. The event featured Milena Hrdinková (State Secretary of the Czech Republic for European Affairs), Ambassador Jakub Dürr, Vladimír Bartovic (Director, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy), Orsolya Raczova (Research Fellow, GLOBSEC Slovakia), Sándor Gyula Nagy (Deputy Director for Research, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary) and Jakub Groszkowski (Head of Central European Department, Centre for Eastern Studies of Poland). Debate was moderated by Martin Michelot (Deputy Director, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy). More than 90 people participated in the discussion.

The event was opened by Lucie Čadilová, Director of the Delegation of Prague to the EU, who warmly welcomed the participants on behalf of the hosting organisation. Moderator of the evening, Martin Michelot continued with thanking all co-organisers and introducing the Think Visegrad platform.

Milena Hrdinková was the first speaker to take the floor. She expressed her regret about the EU’s perception in the Czech Republic and called on the Brussels-based stakeholders to work on promoting a more positive image of the EU. In her opening speech, Ms. Hrdinková strongly refused the popular

rhetoric of “the evil Brussels” and stressed the importance of the member states in the decision-making process on the EU level, stating that it is therefore the national states who are responsible to the citizens. She outlined that the positive aspects and achievements of the EU membership should be discussed more often, pointing out the undeniable convergence brought by the EU membership, not only on the economical level. Ms. Hrdinková then noted that some member states feel logically frustrated when the EU is moving forward faster than they can. She concluded by encouraging the present representatives to perform in a way that a similar commemorating festive event could be organised again 15 years from now.

Second keynote speaker, Ambassador Jakub Dürr reminded the audience of several important European anniversaries of 2018 and 2019, underlining the 30th anniversary of the year 1989 and its international context which allowed a broad transformation in Central and Eastern Europe. He stressed the Czech example, where one of the slogans of the 1989 Velvet Revolution was “Back to Europe” and the EU became a symbol of transformations and integration. He also emphasized a specific momentum which the year 2004 gave to the Visegrad countries. Similar hope, Mr. Dürr noted, should not be denied to Western Balkans countries seeking to access the EU. Moreover, he reminded that the enlargement strategy has been one of the core dynamics of the EU and that its potential should be used again. Ambassador concluded by stressing that the 2004 EU-enlargement strengthened the Union as a whole.

The event continued by a panel discussion with experts from all four Visegrad countries. Moderator, Mr. Michélot, opened the debate by asking the panellist about positive impact the EU had on their respective countries.

First to speak was Orsolya Raczova from GLOBSEC who stressed open borders as one of the key benefits of the EU-membership, along with opportunities in educational sphere, such as the Erasmus programme and various training possibilities. She then noted that the Slovak public appreciates country’s EU membership. Although the public opinion has been fluctuating, the support for the EU reaches high numbers in Slovakia, even among country’s political representatives, and people in Slovakia express a high score of trust to the EU institution. According to Ms. Raczova, such numbers are a good starting point for the future.

Sándor Gyula Nagy of IFAT opened his speech by stating that the EU-enlargement brought many positive aspects to Central-Eastern European countries in general, underlining students’ opportunities to study and live abroad. On the other hand, Mr. Nagy mentioned risks of the single market, which causes the part of Hungarian economy depending on foreign companies to be likely to encounter difficulties in

times of economic crisis. Mr. Nagy also expressed a wish to reach a new economic boom which would allow Hungary to be independent on the EU funds in the future and having a possibility to reach an average EU GDP – comparable for instance with the GDP of the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic’s perspective was the third one to be presented. Vladimír Bartovic emphasized that the accession to the EU has been a success in all political, economic and social terms. He stressed that the EU is now stronger having the Visegrad countries as member states and that it wouldn’t be doing better without those countries, just like Central European countries wouldn’t be doing better without the EU. Mr. Bartovic however noted that the public opinion in the Czech Republic regarding the EU has been changing during the years, going from a large support to in the first years after the accession, through a radical decrease in public support, to a new increase of support since 2016. Those changes have both nation-specific and broader European reasons: Czech public space is dominated by hard Eurosceptical views and the support to the EU decreased in general on the EU level following the 2008 financial crisis. Mr. Bartovic also stressed that the issue of security has been the most important according to opinion polls in the Czech Republic, yet people do not understand what role the EU plays as a security provider. He concluded that politicians and their attitude towards the EU will always be the crucial factor in shaping the public opinion.

Jakub Groszkowski reflected on the Polish perspective. While the EU has been seen positively by Poles, it has been much more complicated to convince the Western European partners that the 2004 enlargement was a positive step for them as well. In terms of economy, Mr. Groszkowski stressed that the single market with Germany boosted also trade exchanges with other Central-Eastern European countries, including the Czech Republic. However, he pointed out that a single market is going to be a challenging agenda after Brexit happens and mentioned also the negative consequences Brexit will have for the UK on the level of academia. Finally he touched upon the role the EU membership played for Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Mr. Michelot acknowledged the speeches being complementary and showing also a Central-Eastern European cooperation in a broader context. He then opened the floor to the audience. The Q & A session covered a wide range of topics from possible recommendations especially to Czech politicians and public sphere in promoting the benefits of the EU, to the question of a minimum European wage. In their final reflection, the panellists summed up what should be the priorities for the Visegrad countries, as

well as for the EU in the upcoming 15 years – such as dealing with dual quality standards, innovations and digitalisations, a stronger awareness regarding the conditions of the non-Eurozone member states and the enlargement policy toward Western Balkans.

The debate covered a wide range of topics surrounding the security relationship within the EU and beyond its borders.