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LIV COSAC  
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## Some reflections on the EU's enlargement policy

Dear Chair, esteemed colleagues,

When eleven years ago Slovenia and nine other countries joined the European Union, the then President of the European Commission Romano Prodi said at the accession ceremony in Nova Gorica that – and I quote: "Slovenia will, together with the other new Member States, boost the Union's confidence and enthusiasm for the future and give it the strength to make our common goals a reality. The accession of the new Member States will do Europe good, and will open up new horizons for everyone. Together we will be better able to defend our common interests and the values on which the Union is founded."

The first years of this century were filled with enthusiasm, big plans and ambition. At the same time, furthering and enlargement of the Union were some kind of twin sisters, since both were seen as key factors for the Union "serving" its citizens and asserting its position at the global level. But shortly after its 2007 enlargement, the rumours of its enlargement "fatigue" started to spread. In the wake of the economic and financial crisis, the EU started – which is logical – to tackle its own situation, while enlargement was a priority put on the back burner. This was also reflected last October at the outset of the new Commission, when its current President Jean-Claude Juncker indicated that there would be no enlargement of the European Union within the next five years. In the Commission's work programme for this year, the statement by the President of the Commission was given a clear context – and I quote: "As stated in the political guidelines, ongoing enlargement negotiations will

continue, and notably the Western Balkans will need to keep a European perspective, but no further enlargement will take place in the next five years." Such an approach to enlargement is reflected also in the current composition of the Commission, in which we have a Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and – I stress – Enlargement Negotiations, and not Enlargement, as in its previous compositions.

It is often said that the enlargement policy is the Union's most successful foreign policy. I dare say that the Union as an economic and political player still has an attractive power for those European countries which are not yet members of the EU, but wish to become such. Due to the crisis which the Union is going through and with which it is not coping too well, this attractive power is weaker than it was at the time of accession of the countries which became members in the first decade of this century. I believe that in the past, the fact which significantly contributed to the success and credibility of the enlargement policy, in addition to the political will on all sides, was that the criteria for membership were clearly defined. If the rules of the game – in this case the criteria that need to be met for membership – are clear, then the process itself is transparent and credible, both for the Member States and the candidate countries. In this context, two things are important: on the one hand to consistently meet all the necessary criteria for membership by the candidate countries, and on the other hand to enable them to progress in the negotiations when the candidate countries have met the required conditions and criteria. If it comes to either a failure in the achievement of the set criteria or interference therewith, even though the required criteria have been met, it reduces the credibility of the enlargement policy and may have negative consequences on the attitude towards the Union among the population of the candidate countries.

When I look back at the time of Slovenia's accession to the European Union, I may note that the required criteria were an indeed important driver for all the necessary economic, political, social and other reforms in our country. I believe the same is true for other countries. The transition into a democratic society would probably have been slower, perhaps it would even have stalled Slovenia's establishment as a democratic and social state, governed by the rule of law and market economy. All reforms implemented at all levels were of course essential for Slovenia itself and they should have been carried out sooner or later even if Slovenia had not become member of the Union. Nonetheless, the Union had an

attractive power like the "light at the end of the tunnel", making all the processes of adaptation and formation more efficient and faster.

In assessing the above process, we need to be realistic. There is often a gap between the adoption of appropriate legislation and its consistent implementation, thereby creating standards of modern European society seen in the European Union. However, EU membership – as I have mentioned – is an important catalyst for the legislation not to remain a dead letter.

In such context, if we look at this year's enlargement strategy recently published by the Commission, not much has changed. All the challenges that former candidate countries and current members needed to deal with, remain very much the same. In the current strategy, the Commission confirms that the European perspective of the candidate countries is an important factor ensuring peace, stability and security. It reaffirms the importance of the adoption and implementation of reforms in the field of rule of law and basic human rights and freedoms. Ensuring the functioning of democratic institutions and increased efforts to promote economic development and competitiveness are still in the foreground. The Commission also restates that the majority of the candidate countries consider an effective and independent judiciary, the fight against organized crime and corruption at higher levels to be important challenges.

Enlargement has always had a significant impact on the strengthening of the Union, particularly in economic, political and security terms. The former Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle wrote at the end of April 2014 in his statement on the tenth anniversary of the 2004 enlargement – and I quote: "Enlargement is in Europe's DNA. It is a key EU policy. It is the most powerful instrument of transformation – it serves as a strong incentive for reforms. Enlargement is also the most effective and powerful tool we have for strengthening security. Together – in a united Europe – we can better face the consequences of globalisation, the financial crisis or climate change. And enlargement has made us all more prosperous. Accession benefited both those countries joining the EU and the established Member States."

As regards the migration issue, I consider it necessary to emphasize that this indeed affects – whether we admit it or not – the enlargement policy. We all know that Turkey and some countries of the Western Balkans, especially Serbia and (the former Yugoslav Republic of) Macedonia, are particularly heavily burdened by the

refugee crisis. Enhanced cooperation in this area between the Union and this region is crucial from the humanitarian and security aspects. Indirectly, this could mean more political will to make certain shifts also in the relations with the candidate countries. However, as I have mentioned, we need to maintain the credibility of the enlargement process by demanding strict adherence to commitments on both sides – by the Member States and the candidate countries.

Allow me to outline in a few sentences – considering that one of the purposes of the debates within COSAC is also sharing practices – how the enlargement negotiations are addressed in the National Assembly. In this respect, we somehow inherited the practice from the time of Slovenia's accession to the Union when the working bodies, particularly the Committee on Foreign Policy, discussed all of the Slovenia-EU negotiation chapters so as to ensure transparency of the association process.

As regards the strategic documents relating to enlargement, since Slovenia's accession to the Union and the establishment of the Committee on EU Affairs, the latter has been addressing 32 negotiating chapters, whereas the Committee on Foreign Policy has been dealing with 3 such chapters, depending on the two committees' competences in accordance with the national legal framework in Slovenia. The Government submits to the National Assembly a draft common EU position on the opening or provisional closure of certain negotiating chapters (namely for all chapters of all candidate countries) and the position taken with regard to that particular draft. The Committee then holds a debate with the Government representatives and adopts an opinion whether or not it supports the position adopted by the Government. A preliminary opinion on these documents in terms of the content of specific chapters is also taken by the working bodies responsible. In such way, the National Assembly or its committees are kept fully informed of the enlargement process. In our opinion, such an approach gives the Government greater democratic legitimacy in decision-making in the enlargement negotiations.

I would like to conclude my reflections on the EU's enlargement policy, which in the medium term cannot afford "grey areas" on the European continent also due to global developments, by paraphrasing a thought of one of the founding fathers of European integration. In the booklet *For Europe*, Robert Schuman wrote that "Europe must cease to be a geographical assembly of juxtaposed States, too often opposed to one another; they must become a

community of distinct nations which join together in the same defensive and constructive endeavour. It must not be a temporary remedy, intended for averting an exceptional danger; or for filling in a crack in a crumbling wall. Europe needs to live better via the pooling of its own resources. It must become an active entity, aware of its distinctive features and organise itself bearing its needs and its possibilities in mind, in a world that is also no longer a shapeless and confused bulk occasionally launching into action in the event of conflict." In this sense, the enlargement may also be seen as an opportunity for Europe, so as to tackle the current and future global challenges more efficiently.

Thank you for your attention.