EU HEADLINES

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF EUROPEAN DEBATES

The roaring 20s

As this week marks the 20th anniversary of the 2004 enlargement, we take a look at how things have developed for some Member States over the past two decades.

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Celebration time, come (n)on

The 20-year enlargement anniversary was yet another celebration that went by unnoticed in Hungary. Perhaps with good reason: there is little to celebrate. From a socio-economic perspective, Hungary's two decades in the EU have been one big missed opportunity, writes newspaper *Balkan Insight.* The explanation? Hungary, which used to be a forerunner in Central Europe up to 2000, has now fallen behind most of its peers by most measures. Andras Biro-Nagy, director of Policy Solutions, stated that EU membership was a great opportunity for Hungary, but it could have done much more if it had been used effectively. As an example, he cites the massive inflow of EU funds – totalling around €83 billion, or an average of 3.5% of GDP per year – which has led to some development but failed to narrow Hungary's regional disparities. Three out of seven Hungarian regions still rank among the EU's poorest, with very slow convergence over the last 20 years. An additional challenge is Viktor Orbán's decade-long battle with European institutions, which did not help the country make the most of its EU membership. As the enlargement anniversary went by in silence in Hungary, the list of reasons not to blow out the birthday candles goes on.

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What's good for the goose...

As 1 May marked the 20-year enlargement anniversary for Poland, amongst others, Poland has recorded the lowest level of support for the country's presence in the EU in more than a decade, according to a new survey published by a Polish pollster, *Notes from Poland* reports. The score in the poll comes after years of record-high support for EU membership, often close to or exceeding 90%, and shows a clear division between the supporters of the ruling coalition and opposition voters. No reason to celebrate, one might ask? Not necessarily – 20 years after the 2004 enlargement, Poles are on average 40% richer than they would have been if the country had not joined the EU, finds the Polish Economic Institute. The new report also indicate that Poland has been the biggest economic beneficiary of EU membership among the eastern Member States that have joined the bloc since 2004. The polls were published just in time for the upcoming European elections from 6-9 June, which might see a record turnout, as 71% of all Eurobarometer respondents declare their participation as probable.

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...is good for the gander

Marking 20 years since the "big bang unification" of the 2004 enlargement, *The Irish Times* recounts Wednesday's shared celebration between Poland and Germany at the bridge over the Oder-Neisse line, attended by the countries' respective foreign ministers as well as those holding the post in 2004, and takes a look into how things have changed. Though support for the EU amongst Poles has taken a hit as of late, recent studies show that the country's GDP has doubled since joining and property prices are on the rise, making Poland now the third-fastest growing EU economy in the past 10 years. It is not only Poland, but all of the EU that has been positively transformed since the enlargement – as former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said, it elevated the EU "not just as a western European project but a pan-European project." Of course, security and defence are top of mind, and European Council President Charles Michel characterised further enlargement as a way to prevent a "new Iron Curtain" from falling. The Oder-Neisse line, where the ministers met, once marked its own contentious border – now it is just one among many open borders within the EU.

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Don't EU forget about me

At a press conference with European Council President Charles Michel marking the enlargement anniversary this week, *Times of Malta* journalists wanted to make sure that the EU isn't giving preferential treatment to the larger Member States amidst concerns that migration and economic rules are hitting some countries harder than others. A new shipping tax, which is hitting Malta's economy as they had warned it would, is only "one specific element" in the "global picture", he said, pointing to other means of support that the EU has provided over the years. There were also challenges as to the EU's true priorities, with implications that enlargement is being prioritised and rule of law de-prioritised for the sake of cohesion during turbulent times geopolitically. On rule of law, Michel once again pointed to a "broader context", explaining that it remains a crucial issue but must be measured carefully, and on enlargement, Michel recognised it as a strategy but that the EU must stick to its commitments. Michel further emphasised the importance of truth and transparency for the sake of democracy and in the face of various anti-European forces within and without.

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