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The Enlargement of European Union in a time of new challenges

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The year of 2014 is really important to the European Union due to its symbolism of being the 10th anniversary of the Enlargement of the EU towards the east, and the year of 2004 is an important mark on the European process of regional integration story.

It was on May 1st, 2014 that seventy five millions of people became citizens of the European Union. They belong to ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as from the Mediterranean, among them Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus. The Enlargement of EU was followed by the entrance of Romania and Bulgaria, and more recently by Croatia in 2013. The anniversary of this event represents the opportunity to remember and celebrate over 60 years of the process of European Integration and its achievements. The process of European integration is a unique project based on the idea of a united Europe whose expansion was made possible thanks to a series of expansions and the consolidation of peace and prosperity throughout the European continent. In 1952, the European Coal and Steel Community was founded and United for 21 years its six founding countries, West Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg. Since then the original Community evolved significantly and became the European Union that nowadays united its 28 member states, including Croatia's recent membership in 2013.

From the beginning, the process of European integration distinguished by intention to make war "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible." Therefore it started with the establishment of the foundations on which it was

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possible to build a partnership for peace and freedom among nations of a continent that had been divided and torn by successive wars for centuries. Today, there is no doubt that the process of European integration is among the most successful peace project in contemporary world history, if not the most successful of them all. Countries before enemies and faced each other in devastating conflicts, now live peacefully and share common values. Now they build together an economic union always growing, a true European citizenship, a coherent set of norms applicable in all Member States, in addition to being a set of supraregionais institutions responsible for the preservation of common interest.

Since the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the grouping has already expanded several times, extending the area of peace, democracy and stability throughout the European continent. In 1973, Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom joined the European Community. In 1981, it was Greece's turn, followed by Spain and Portugal in 1986 and Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995. The largest and most complex enlargement occurred between 2004 and 2007: 12 new Member States, before part of the Soviet bloc, joined the European Union, sealing the reunification and reconciliation of Europe after years of artificial division during the Cold War. Malta and Cyprus also followed them in 2004.

As in previous cases, the enlargements of 2004, 2007 and 2013 were not natural events, but rather a process that included long periods of preparation for both the European Union and the candidate states. The new Member States have had to adopt the so-called '*acquis communautaire*', the laws and standards of the European Union, and prove that they consolidated the required administrative capacity and have taken the necessary economic measures to integrate in a free market. This process requires effort and sacrifice by the candidates and testimony of an imperishable political will. It is worth emphasizing the fact that it was also not an easy process for the European Union. The expansion of the "Europe of the fifteen" to the "Europe of the twenty-eight" required a significant increase in flexibility and adaptability in order to deepen political and economic cooperation between the states. This courageous decision in 1993 was heavily criticized; many feared that accepting new member states with political, economic and social history as heterogeneous up risked undermining the magnificent results obtained so far. The reality proved otherwise and showed that the fear of expansion was not justified.



Ten years have passed since that historic moment and in that period the European Union has achieved great accomplishments by the expansion process. The transformative power of the European Union has helped the new Member States to rebuild and modernize their economies, to reform their institutions and develop their communities and cultures. The fact that this was possible is one of the most wonderful developments of our time. After sixty years of oppression, the expansion of the European Union represented, for the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, the reunification of our continent based on the values of freedom, democracy, rule of law, and the respect for human rights and the dignity of the human being.

The expansion process has always been a beneficial process for all, which has proven to be an enriching experience for both parties and of which we can be proud to be one of the most successful strategies of the European Union, or even the most successful of all.

The expansion proved to be one of the most important instruments for the prosperity of the European continent. Expanded our domestic market and made the EU the largest integrated economic area in the world. It also increased trade, financial flows and business opportunities for companies in the European Union and its new member countries, creating more jobs and growth. The expansion improved the living standards in the new Member States and has provided a powerful stimulus to the entire European economy, since the older Member States also benefited from the new export and investment opportunities and a larger market. In addition, when it interacts with its strategic regional partners such as Brazil, the European Union has become more attractive for foreign direct investment. In this sense, access thirteen new members strengthened the EU's position worldwide and strengthened its weight as an international economic actor.

It is necessary to stress that the expansion of the European Union has helped to improve the quality of life of their people. The enlargement process has helped make democracy a reality and to strengthen the stability of the "old continent"; made Europe a safer place because of the ongoing promotion of democracy and fundamental freedoms, consolidating the rule of law by reducing, for example, the impact of transboundary crimes. In this sense, its importance in everyday life of our fellow European citizens continues to increase.



In addition, with respect to its foreign policy, the expansion of the European Union allowed it to increase its weight as a global actor in the international arena and made it safer, stronger and richer, from the political point of view. It has given the European Union more influence in the multipolar world of today due the continued projection of our values and interests beyond our borders and the establishment of high standards worldwide with its regulatory power through cooperation in areas such as, energy, transportation, rule of law, migration, food security, environmental protection and climate change. Furthermore, the expansion of the European Union brought the improvement of good relations between neighbors to the East and the Balkans and at the same time ensuring the attraction, influence and credibility of Europe in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Americas and exceeding the colonial legacy of the past.

Nowadays the enlargement policy continues to anchor stability and boost transformation in the Western Balkans (Montenegro, Serbia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo) who legitimately aspire to join the European Union. But most recently, with the momentous geopolitical events in Eastern Europe and in particular in Ukraine, where its citizens were willing to defend our common values of democracy, rule of law and respect for individual freedoms, the expansion policy gained further momentum and *raison d'être*. This climate has confirmed the attraction of the European integration process and its vision of a world based on the rule of law and democracy, in cooperation and not in confrontation, where the principle of social and political equality is valid and should be applied to all citizens.

However, this process should not be taken for granted, since, nowadays many populists, demagogues and xenophobes are trying to undermine confidence in our European project. At such a crucial point, the European Family must remain vigilant and able to firmly confront the challenges of the future defending the very foundations of the integration process and being aware of the great achievements that this process has brought to the European continent.

The success of these sixty years of integration has shown that only "united in diversity" we can meet the global challenges we face, while keeping the door open for the European project continues to grow and to provide peace and prosperity, as a model that it is of regional integration.