

## Report:

### Impact of the Russian war in Ukraine on European Security Architecture and EU's Eastern Neighborhood

On October 25th, EUROPEUM's Brussels Office under the representation of Think Visegrad Brussels and in cooperation with Fondation Robert Schuman organized an expert discussion titled "Impact of the Russian War in Ukraine on European Security Architecture and EU's Eastern Neighborhood". This discussion, which was held under the Chatham House rules, gathered 19 experts from think-tanks, EU institutions, NATO and diplomats from EU Member states.

The discussion began with an assessment of the EU's role as a diplomatic actor, concluding that it has largely fallen short. It was emphasized that while the EU does have a strategy in place, it often fails to implement it due to divergent opinions on foreign security matters, ultimately weakening its political influence. The recent example of the Israel-Hamas war and the bombing of Gaza strip was cited as evidence of this. However, lessons were drawn from the situation in Ukraine and the immediate reaction of the EU from the first days of Russian invasion, demonstrating that the EU can unite when the stakes are high, although some doubts over the sustainability of this unity still persist among experts.

Experts emphasized the importance of the EU having a meaningful presence on the geopolitical table alongside the US, Russia, and China, asserting that credibility hinges not only on decision-making but also on possessing sufficient military capabilities and political will. It was stressed by some speakers that achieving a greater level of European defense autonomy is crucial for bolstering security, in cooperation with NATO, which requires strong partners to be most effective. Yet, there were also some voices which raised negative opinions on the questions concerning defense autonomy of the EU, drawing attention to the importance of unity with the US.

If the EU can bolster its effectiveness and unity to achieve the ambition of a global player, a reliable and respected security actor, the EU would in effect also enhance its

competitiveness and investment. On a different note, a couple of speakers mentioned that solidarity must prevail in the pursuit, and there is a need to also reinforce the EU's soft power, which has been waning, evident in the reluctance of other actors, namely the global south, to align with the EU on its positions towards the conflict in Gaza. Overall, the EU is still perceived as a selective player, choosing its engagements carefully.

The discussion then shifted towards the aspects of democracy, asserting that Europe should present a unified voice in response to current events threatening democracy and rule of law both on its continent, and in its neighborhoods. Furthermore, it was emphasized that the EU should listen to its member countries, acknowledging that for example Central European countries were correct in their assessments of Russia, raising their concerns for several years, while some of the Western members did not see these concerns as so severe. In current challenging times, the EU should try to align its voice with its allies.

It was argued that the EU should play a more active role in its neighborhoods, ideally in coordination with its closest allies. Rather than focusing on the differences that divide the EU and the US when discussing a stronger EU, the emphasis should be on their shared foundation: democracy. Therefore, it was suggested that European Strategic Autonomy should be pursued in cooperation with the US and NATO, rather than as outside of this partnership. Furthermore, experts stressed the need for the EU to convince the US government that the EU is a responsible defense actor, by demonstrating the shared objectives and their defense capability. On another note, experts contended that coalitions within the EU are inevitable, and that rather than striving for a unified European military, Europe should come to terms with this reality of smaller functioning coalitions.

Another important aspect of the discussion was the EU's neighborhood and enlargement policy. Experts emphasized the importance of the kept promises to the candidate countries, if it aims to be a geopolitical force. They noted that some progress has been made in the enlargement process, particularly in the Western Balkans, but in general, the region was largely stagnating in the past decade, also due to the lack of interest on the EU's side, impacting the pace of reforms from the Balkan countries. The understanding of

Enlargement policy has shifted from whether enlargement is feasible to how it should be carried out and how it should contribute to the broader European context. This change is largely attributed to the Ukraine conflict, which has reshaped the fundamentals of the EU enlargement process and accelerated the integration of Western Balkan countries. However, the backsliding of these countries can be seen as a response to the slow and inadequate response from the European Institutions. Furthermore, experts highlighted the need for the EU to reform its processes, as veto power has hindered concrete actions, ultimately eroding the institution's geopolitical influence. This also undermines the EU's long-term credibility, as promises have been made without tangible follow-through. The issue of timing was also raised, as it is crucial for countries to have a clear trajectory, but concerns arise about potentially postponing the enlargement discussion due to upcoming parliamentary elections in the spring 2024.

Turning attention to Ukraine in the enlargement process, experts stressed the importance of reliable and trustworthy partners in the endeavor. They emphasized that words must be backed by action to facilitate the country's transition and alignment with EU and NATO standards. While providing guidance is crucial, meeting the country's needs is equally vital. Additionally, it was argued that the sanctions against Russia need to be more stringent, as the current measures no longer have a meaningful impact. Furthermore, demonstrating genuine willingness from the West to initiate enlargement talks would signal the EU's sincere intent to engage with its neighbors, ultimately paving the way for future enlargement.

Lastly, speakers discussed the current state of EU Neighborhood policy, a tool that is currently seen as ineffective and on the brink of collapse due to the new political realities both within the EU, with an influx of new candidate countries, but also stark differences between the neighboring countries. There is a need to rethink and restructure Neighborhood policy in a way in which the EU sets clear ambitions on how it wants to strengthen partnership with our Eastern and Southern neighbors which don't have the aspiration of joining the EU, which are the crucial policy areas of this cooperation, and what kind of differentiation there is among the countries within the neighborhood policy.

## About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making. We are the recipient of institutional funding from the European Commission under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.