In the Year of Anniversary

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"The EU enlargement policy's geopolitical significance is clear: it is a long-term investment into peace, prosperity and stability for our continent" – High Commissioner Josep Borrell

Joining the European Union brings clear benefits for a country's progress. Businesses gain access to a market of over 500 million consumers, and national governments become part of continent-wide legislative efforts. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the largest EU expansion, which saw Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Poland, Cyprus, Malta, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joining the European family in 2004. However, discussions about further enlargement dominate this anniversary, driven by circumstances of war, loss, and security concerns.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukraine rightfully sought membership in the European Union. Since 2017, both parties have been engaged in an association agreement, strengthening political and economic ties to the point where membership became a natural progression. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed confidence in Ukraine's readiness for this step, stating "I am confident we have deserved it.". Yet, amidst stability and support from the EU to Ukraine in the war against the aggressor, accession itself presents significant challenges. The process demands substantial change and dedication, presenting European decision-makers with a unique puzzle. Unlike the typical accession route, Ukraine faces accession talks during one of the most unstable periods in its history.

Despite these challenges, Ukraine's accession to the European Union holds promise for Ukraine's and the EU's future. When Ukraine accedes to the European Union will depend greatly on how and when its war with Russia ends, but the preparatory work could be started now. The benefits of Ukraine in the European Union would mean bolstering democratic reforms, deepening regional cooperation, solving labour market issues, and expanding the EU's regulatory framework and security architecture in the Eastern flank of the continent. Such developments could also mitigate the risk of regional conflicts spilling over and enhance security for both Ukraine and the broader European region. In brief, EU accession would not only give a crucial boost to Ukraine's complicated economic and institutional desovietization transition but also would enhance the European road to a strong and stable union.

Therefore, although the current puzzle of Ukraine's accession still lacks many answers, the work should be continued as the European Union would only become stronger with Ukraine in it. In essence, Ukraine is Europe, not only geographically but also culturally, historically, and spiritually. Its journey towards EU membership is a testament to the enduring strength and resilience of the European project, reminding us that our collective destiny is linked to the pursuit of peace, prosperity, and progress for all. As we continue to navigate the complexities of Ukraine's accession process, let us remain steadfast in our commitment to building a Europe that is inclusive, prosperous, and united in diversity.

I congratulate everybody on the 20th anniversary of the enlargement and I wish Europeans strength and will to stand for the values we believe in.