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**Greece's Response to the Challenges of
Deepening EU Integration and Further Enlargement**

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Abstract

As the European Parliament elections of June 2024 approach, there is EU-wide debate on the Union's future that includes the question whether the EU is fit for purpose, if and when the EU becomes a Union of 35+ Member States. The seven candidate Member States from the Western Balkans slowly fulfill requirements for EU Membership, albeit at an uneven pace. Meanwhile in December 2023 Ukraine and Moldova were invited to open accession negotiations with the EU and Georgia was granted candidate status, upon fulfillment of certain preconditions. The Union will sooner or later become larger. It could not function if it keeps its current, already cumbersome, institutional set up. However, on this topic the views of Member States are bound to diverge.

Greece is a firm supporter of EU's deepening integration and further enlargement, particularly regarding EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans. Most Greek political and technocratic elites are in favor of deepening EU integration. They think positively of the differentiated integration of EU Member States and phased integration of candidate EU Member States. However, such elites and the Greek government are reluctant to abandon the right to veto that EU Member States can exercise in crucial policy domains, such as foreign and security policy and enlargement. There is a contradiction between Greece's support of a stronger and more cohesive EU and its reservations about further curbing the unanimity rule in voting procedures. While Greece wants to partake in the inner circle of decision-making states in the EU, it is constrained by the multiple challenges the country faces in Southeastern Europe and Eastern Mediterranean.

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Introduction

In the early 2020s the world is not anymore what it used to be, even ten years ago, so the European Union (EU) cannot remain as it used to be either. Close to EU's external borders there is war (Ukraine, the Middle East). A strong power (Russia) challenges the EU in geopolitical terms, while EU's economic competitors (the USA, China) jockey for positions in the world economy. Europeans have sustained the negative effects of Covid-19 pandemic, but such severe public health challenges may arise again in the future. Meanwhile, the climate crisis continues unabated. These are global developments requiring the concerted action of EU decision-making organs and EU Member-States.

While the EU has survived many crises in its own territory, including the Eurozone crisis, the sudden inflow of migrants and refugees in the mid-2010s and the Covid-19 pandemic, it cannot continue operate on a default mode. The EU's status quo is not sustainable (Tsoukalis 2016). In view of the European Parliament elections of June 2024, various reform proposals have been put forward.

For example, the Franco-German proposal of September 2023 couched the internal reform and enlargement of the EU in geo-strategic terms (Report of the Franco-German Group 2023). The defense and political risks posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 were, among other reasons, the cause for the accelerated and drastic reforms, without Treaty change, that this proposal has envisaged.

Suggested reforms include new voting procedures, a larger EU budget, and stricter monitoring of rule of law. By now there is a wide range of reactions of EU Member States to the deepening of European integration, while some candidate Member States may be more ready than others to become fully integrated into the EU. To respond to this complication, the Franco-German proposal adopts a strategy of "phasing in". It refers to gradual integration of candidate countries, some of which may be admitted to the single market earlier than in other common policy areas (e.g., security).

Eventually, according to the Franco-German proposal, a three-tier EU may arise. It will consist of an inner circle of Member States, an outer circle of "associate" Member States, and an even wider circle of states participating in a "European Political Community". In brief, a few Member States may jointly decide about and spend funds on specific policies, while others will not. The proposal recommends a) the further application of majority voting, instead of unanimity, in decision-making, b) changes in majority thresholds (60% of all countries representing 60% of the population) and c) a stratification in the body of EU Commissioners to allow for swifter action of the European Commission.

Furthermore, the absorption of new, less developed East European and West Balkan (WB) candidate countries would require an increase in the EU's budget, lest all current Member States become net contributors. Finally, the deterioration of rule of law in a few Member States and the condition of democracy in most candidate countries is the reason behind the proposal's insistence on increasing EU's sanctioning powers in cases of rule of law infringement.

Another reform proposal was put forward by the Conclave "Europe 2040" group of experts in March 2024 (Conclave 2024). The proposal advocates a promotion of European common interests, values, and unity

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among EU Member States and is structured on the need for the EU to produce new public goods for Europeans. These public goods lie in the four following fields: Geopolitics, Science and Technology, Development model, and Democracy. The EU cannot pursue a meaningful policy in none of the above intertwined four domains unless it changes its decision-making processes. According to this proposal, barring a few exceptions (e.g. admitting new Member-States, approving of the multiannual financial program), the Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) mechanism should prevail in EU decision-making. While all Member States are bound by core requirements (e.g., safeguarding democracy), the EU should proceed with further integration of the Member States that are willing to do so. Examples already exist (the Schengen countries, the Eurozone countries) and should be multiplied. For instance, there may be a “coalition of the willing” Member States, regarding security and defense (Conclave 2024: 50).

In brief, in the early 2020s while the global order has become more unpredictable, there is a debate in the EU about its future and its capacity to meet recent and future challenges. How do Member-States see their future in the EU amidst the above summarized global developments and reform proposals?

Outline of the Policy Paper

This Policy Paper attempts an answer to such questions regarding the case of Greece. It proceeds as follows. First there is a section on the deepening of EU's integration, followed by a section on QMV. Then there is a section on EU' enlargement, followed by a discussion of the linkages between differentiated integration and phased integration. This is an analysis of how prospective institutional changes in the EU are envisaged in conjunction with EU enlargement. The Policy Brief ends with conclusions and recommendations. Throughout the views of Greek political and technocratic elites as well as the positions the Greek government are discussed.

To provide documentation, the author of the present paper conducted original field and desk research in the winter of 2023 and the early spring of 2024. He conducted six personal interviews with Greek policy advisors-experts on EU affairs and a Greek government source (see the list of interviews at the end of the Policy Paper). He also consulted academic publications and browsed three major Athens-based newspapers of the right, the center and the left (*He Kathimerini*, *To Vima*, *Efimerida ton Syntakton*) for a two-year long period (2022-2023) and websites. Relatively few articles concerned EU's prospects (see the list of references at the end).

Deepening EU Integration

The views of Greek political and technocratic elites

Most of the Greek political elite is pro-European, and more specifically respected politicians support further European integration. For example, the former socialist Prime Minister C. Simitis has advocated the need of further economic and political integration for the EU to participate in today's international economic and political competition among global powers. For him, the EU should pursue its “strategic autonomy” and further strengthen its common policies in economy and technology, without, however, neglecting the constraints of national economies of EU Member States (Simitis 2023).

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The center-right former President of the Greek Republic P. Pavlopoulos believes that the EU should play a planetary role. Without specifying the details of EUs' further strengthening, he assigns the EU a larger than its current role in promoting peace, representative democracy, human rights, and social justice on earth (Pavlopoulos 2023). The former center-right minister M. Varvitsiotis claims that the EU Union should strengthen its common security and defense policies, which is the responsibility of national governments of Member States (Varvitsiotis 2022).

Greek technocrats are in general in favor of further European integration. Regardless of whether they are federalists or not, they believe that the deepening of the EU is in Greece's interest. As L. Tsoukalis has put it: "Located in a difficult neighborhood, and having a fragile economy and relatively weak institutions, Greece needs a strong and cohesive Europe supporting common policies and solidarity among its Member States and playing an active role on the global scene" (Tsoukalis 2021). As the Conclave "Europe 2040", which Tsoukalis co-authored, put it: "The EU must dare to assert itself as a global, sustainable and responsible power and not only as a participant torn between other powers" (Conclave 2024: 1). Moreover, another Greek expert, P. C. Ioakeimidis, supports the enhancement of transnational institutions, such as merging the posts of President of the European Council and President of the European Commission. Merging the two posts into one would help avoiding unnecessary tensions particularly at times of external challenges, such as war in Ukraine and complicated relations with China (Ioakeimidis 2022). These are judicious views of Greek experts.

There is however a dissenting view (Wallden 2023) that claims that the crisis in Ukraine has not strengthened, but weakened the prospects of deepening European integration. Instead of an EU relying on economic strength, solidarity among its Member States and the European social model, a different EU is emerging. The EU becomes subservient to and geopolitically dependent on the USA. While the Recovery and Resilience mechanism of the EU contributed to deeper EU integration, nowadays the only deepening under consideration in the EU is the abolition of the right of Member States to veto foreign and security policy measures. If implemented, this change will serve US interests (Wallden 2023). This view does not do justice to the range of discussions on the deepening of European integration which are not limited to meeting the challenge of Russia. Global challenges (climate change, economic competition with the US and China, immigration), along with the prospect of a more prosperous and cohesive EU, were and continue to be the primary drivers behind on-going debates on European integration, for instance the debate to abolish or not to abolish the remaining instances of unanimity rule in EU decision making organs.

However, among journalists there is also Euroscepticism, left over in Greece from the period of the Greek crisis of the 2010s. It is doubted that Germany, that is accused of halting further economic integration, including a fiscal union during the crisis, currently wants to proceed with the deepening of European integration (Kapopoulos 2022). There are similar expressions of disbelief by the Greek press reflecting the views of left-wing parliamentary opposition (e.g., the newspapers *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, *Avgi*, *Rizospastis*). In terms of geopolitical competition, the war in Ukraine and the rekindling of Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2022-2023 have shown that "the EU is a dwarf" and will remain so unless current internal divisions over major policy choices are not overcome (*Efimerida ton Syntakton* 2023). Thus, the EU is a minor partner in the Euro-Atlantic alliance (Gounaris 2023).

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The problem with such views is that they provide no arguments for a better, alternative, articulated option for the EU. Despite any past mishandling of Russia and China by West European powers in the mid- and late-20th century, today it is Russia that unfolds expansionist ambitions in Europe and China that rolls out an economic penetration of Europe. In that respect, if geopolitical competition is heightened, the EU would not be better off by taking equal distances between on the one hand on the USA and the other hand Russia and/or China, let alone siding with the two latter powers. Nevertheless, for the Russians and the Chinese, the EU could become a more trusted interlocutor than the US. And off course, a possible change of government in the US presidential elections of November 2024, may force the EU to rethink about its allegiances. The Trump presidency (2016-2020) was a period of alienation between the USA and the EU, primarily sparked by the American, not the European, side.

The position of the Greek government

Greece's government is in favor of deepening EU integration with reservations concerning the right to veto EU decisions. There is in fact a contradiction in Greece's aims. Its long-term interests are in tension with its immediate concerns. On the one hand Greece wants in the future to contribute to further European integration, since the country probably subscribes to a more federalist version of the EU. On the other hand, owing to complications of its regional relations with Balkan countries and Turkey, Greece today does not want to concede to the abolition of the right to veto. It wants to uphold that right regarding foreign and security policy issues and enlargement (government source, personal interview, 20.03.2024). Greece's official stance on deepening integration affects its stance on the debate on expanding the cases in which Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) is applied in EU decision-making.

Unanimity rule vs. QMV rule

As it is well known, Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), instead of the requirement of unanimity, is already a rule of voting procedure provided by the Treaty of the European Union (TEU, articles 16 and 31). The question is whether QMV should apply to almost all domains of policy making, for European integration to become deeper (e.g., regarding foreign policy, Missiroli and Lonardo 2024).

This question will become, if it has not already become, an existential question for the EU. In the past, one or more Member States prevented joint action by the EU. In the future, in the context of an EU of 35+ Member States, too many Member States may be tempted to pose a veto on larger and smaller issues, depending on national interests or temporary alliances in EU decision-making organs. EU may be hostage to one or two countries. EU decision-making will easily come to a halt on numerous occasions, which means that the EU will be almost void of any meaning as far as a union of states is concerned.

The views of Greek technocratic elites and journalists

Regarding the QMV, among Greek policy advisors, experts, and journalists there is a convergence towards the view that the EU will become dysfunctional if it does not adopt the QMV albeit with selected "emergency breaks". The breaks will be useful to protect vital interests of Member States in selected policy areas (e.g., national sovereignty, defense).

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More concretely, the current unanimity vote rule is “completely inappropriate” (V. Hatzopoulos, personal interview, 24.10.2023). As P.C. Ioakeimidis has calculated, “over a period of 42 years (1981-2023) Greece has exercised the right to veto EU decisions 16 times, but only once (in the 1999 Helsinki Summit) did the use of veto produce tangible benefits for Greece, i.e., the accession of Cyprus into the EU” (Ioakeimidis 2023). In brief, the unanimity vote rule is a “major obstacle in decision-making in EU organs” (P.C. Ioakeimidis, personal interview, 24.10.2024). This type of voting rule “undermines the effectiveness of EU’s capacity to respond to current needs and successive crises” (A. Kritikos, personal interview, 24.10.2023). “In times of ‘permacrisis’, the unanimity vote rule has prevented the EU from taking decisions. QMV should be adopted, but smaller states need to suggest safeguards, understanding that without QMV the EU will reach impasses on various issues. That would undermine smaller states even more than adopting QMV” (J. Emmanouilidis, personal interview, 07.11.2023). In concrete terms, “QMV, in accordance with Article [16](#) of the TEU, should be applied in all policy areas and issues, except for very sensitive security issues” (L. Tsoukalis, personal interview, 06.12.2023).

In sum, the interviewed policy advisors and experts justifiably suggest that there is no alternative to QMV. However, it is possible to consider differently weighted QMV rules, depending on the policy issue at hand. “In selected instances a ‘super QMV’ may be required” (P.C. Ioakeimidis, personal interview, 24.10.2024), so that “smaller states are not over-ruled” (J. Emmanouilidis, personal interview, 07.11.2023).

As in other Member States, in Greece too, vexing questions on EU’s future are not among the priorities of newspapers and websites. While op eds are rare, journalists and columnists periodically write on EU integration and enlargement.

In general, Greek journalists point out that Greece has an interest in promoting the QMV in EU decision-making organs, in some but not all policy sectors. For instance, as Greece is located at the Eastern Mediterranean, it faces recurrent foreign policy challenges by neighboring countries and asymmetrical security and humanitarian challenges (e.g., sudden large inflows by refugees and migrants). The slow pace and complications associated with unanimous voting that involves 27 EU Member States is not fit for urgent decision-making in foreign policy, security, and humanitarian situations of risk. In that respect, Greece would benefit from quicker reactions by other EU Member States in case of international law violations by neighboring Turkey (Nedos 2023). Indeed, it is plausible to argue that the QMV would be helpful in overcoming vetoes put forward by one or two EU Member States that would reject any action taken by the EU in such an instance of threats against Greece.

The position of Greek government

In view of the above, there is a convergence of policy advisors, experts, and journalists in favor of abolishing the veto in EU decision-making. But there are reservations too, as some experts want Greece to be able to use the right to veto in a few circumstances. However, the official position of Greece is much more hesitant. The official Greek position is against the abolition of veto across-the-board. While Greece agrees with the abolition of the right to veto in numerous policy areas (taxation, agricultural policy, etc), it is reluctant to agree with such abolition even on technical issues related to democracy and the rule of law. The Greek position is that technical issues have political dimensions (government source, personal interview, 20.03.2024).

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Official Greek sources claim that the complete revamping of current decision-making in the EU would require a change of treaties. Evidently this would be a painful, if not impossible, task. Moreover, Greek sources put forward four arguments to support the view that exercising the right to veto EU decisions is not as destructive as it seems.

First, for many decades now, the EU has moved forward on many policy fronts, even though Member States had the right to veto EU decisions. EU's institutional reform in the future may not necessarily run into an impasse because of the right to veto. Second, the existence of veto power allows smaller Member States to partake in the process of European integration and be heard, if not listened to, by larger Member States. Otherwise, the smaller Member States would have been permanently marginalized. Third, the possibility of one country posing a veto, motivates the rest to seek common ground, to jointly formulate common EU policies. And fourth, while large Member States have many political, economic, and diplomatic weapons at their disposal, the small ones have no other weapon, except for the threat to exercise a veto (government source, personal interview, 20.03.2024).

In view of the above, it turns out that only in the long-run Greece may concede to the expansion of the use of QMV, subject to "emergency brakes". One thinks however that Greece walks on a very thin line between protecting its interests in the regional conflicts of Southeastern Europe and wanting to partake in the inner circle of the EU that presses for deeper European integration sooner than later.

On EU's Enlargement

As it is well known, the process of EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans was rebooted after the breakout of the Ukrainian crisis in February 2022. In brief, candidate countries used to be assessed on how fit they were to join a union of advanced market economies and functioning liberal democracies. Enlargement, which primarily used to have an economic and institutional aspect, has acquired a pressing geopolitical dimension. If it was not for EU's drive to win Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia over from Russia, the West Balkan enlargement would not have been revived. Nowhere has this become more evident than in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the laggard among WB countries regarding prospects of EU accession. Yet, in November 2023, the European Commission recommended starting accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and granting candidate status for Georgia (upon the latter country fulfilling certain preconditions). And the European Council in December 2023 followed these recommendations.

The views of Greek technocratic elites

There is no consensus on how the enlargement process should proceed, but clearly the rapidly evolving debate on enlargement to the Western Balkans "would have been impossible, without the Ukrainian war. Before 2020 enlargement had been relegated to an issue of secondary importance. Now enlargement has become part of the basic rationale of the EU, as it is tied with the future direction of the EU" (J. Emmanouilidis, a German-Greek expert, personal interview, 07.11.2023). There is also the fear that the "current momentum for reform of EU decision making processes will be lost, if enlargement does not progress" (J. Emmanouilidis, personal interview, 07.11.2023).

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Thus, “phased integration should be accelerated and become ‘phased accession’ for selected West Balkan candidate countries” (P.C. Ioakeimidis, personal interview, 24.10.2023). Yet, it must be acknowledged that West Balkan candidate countries today grossly underperform regarding democracy and the rule of law (Wallden 2023). Only those countries which resolve their lingering, grave problems regarding democracy and the rule of law should be admitted to the EU. “Not all the candidate countries should be allowed in, at the same time. Otherwise, the EU will acquire a set of Orban-like political regimes” (L. Tsoukalis, personal interview, 06.12.2023).

Moreover, Greek experts still have in sight another case of enlargement, mostly forgotten by non-Greeks, which is the case of Turkey. While a Turkey-EU rapprochement is in Greece's longer-term interests, Greece must determine what conditionalities it should suggest to the EU to constrain the Turkish revisionist foreign policy regarding sovereignty over Greek territories and rights in the Aegean Sea (Pagoulatos 2022).

The position of the Greek government

Greece's official position on enlargement is very supportive of West Balkan (WB) candidate countries' joining the EU (Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024). Greece's support of WB countries has been stable since the EU Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, although it has differed by country. For instance, Greece has vetoed EU's enlargement to North Macedonia. Fortunately, the Prespes Agreement of 2018 between Greece and North Macedonia removed Greek objections, as it resolved the Macedonian name issue.

Today, it can be argued that Greece subscribes to the view that enlargement must be preceded by the deepening of European integration and by sufficient implementation of reforms in candidate Member States. Furthermore, based on research for this Policy Brief, there is a nuance in the official Greek position that could be stated as follows: while Greece agrees with the rest of EU Member States that the future of Ukraine and Moldova lies in their integration into the EU, it does not wish to see enlargement to Ukraine and Moldova proceed at the expense of the enlargement prospects of West Balkan candidate countries.

Formally speaking, while Greece supports EU enlargement to the West Balkans as soon as possible, it does not want to raise false hopes among WB candidate countries. Enlargement will be based on the fulfillment of merit criteria (Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2024).

Despite the above official position, Greece probably acknowledges that the task of reforms required from WB countries may be daunting. The Greek government understands that these countries may need time to roll out the required reforms. They may also need to see that the EU shows some flexibility. EU's flexibility should not affect core of requirements (e.g., full implementation rule of law which is not negotiable), but may concern the pace and the extent at which WB candidate countries are able to overcome the constraints posed by historical particularities (e.g., the very strong role of traditional family values, ethnicity-based bonds, and the like).

Moreover, Greece will wait to see how each WB candidate country, in addition to abiding by conditionalities of democracy and the rule of law, will manage specific, lingering problems. These differ by country. Regarding Montenegro, Greece believes that it is a front runner among all WB candidate countries and looks forward to its integration into the EU. Regarding North Macedonia, Greece would like to wait and see the extent to which the Prespes Agreement would really be implemented as far as

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commercial and other practical issues separating the two countries are concerned. Regarding Kosovo, there are no prospects for its recognition soon by the five EU Member States which have refused to do so, including Greece (the four other ones being Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain).

Yet, Greece has no disputes with Kosovo and is arguably the most pro-Kosovar among the 'non-recognizers'. Regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina, Greece has been supportive and has joined Austria's diplomatic initiative "Friends of Western Balkans" that emphasizes that country's EU prospects, but admits that Bosnia-Herzegovina probably trails behind the rest of WB countries in the race to the EU. Regarding Serbia, Greece, following the EU line, waits for the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue to bear fruits before it firmly rallies behind Serbia's drive to join the EU. And regarding Albania, Greece recognizes the large strides that the country has made on its road to European integration, but is worried by unresolved issues (government source, personal interview, 20.03.2024).

Such issues, hampering Greece's support of Albania's candidacy for EU membership, include the imprisonment of the Greek-origin mayor of the city of Himara, where there is a large Greek population. Fredi Beleri was arrested on the eve of municipal elections of 2023 which he went on to win in his native city, running against the government-sponsored mayoral candidate. In a disputable case, Beleri, who had problems with the law in the past, was charged by Albanian authorities on bribing prospective voters. He was thrown to prison, not allowed to assume his duties as Mayor, and eventually, in March 2024, condemned to 2 years imprisonment by the competent Albanian criminal court. The Greek government reacted in April 2024 by including Beleri on the governing party's ticket for the European Parliament elections of June 2024. Thus, Beleri may be elected a Member of the European Parliament, while he remains imprisoned in a EU candidate Member State. Clearly, Greece considers the Beleri affair a breach of the requirement of rule of law on the part of Albania. It will take time to sort out this new episode in Greek-Albanian affairs, while Albania proceeds on its road to Europe.

Differentiated integration of current EU Member States and phased integration of Candidate Member States

EU's future enlargement is intertwined with the institutional reform of the EU in the future. The two processes are the sides of one coin, namely integration, and are couched as differentiated integration and phased integration.

Under differentiated integration, which pertains to countries that have already joined the EU, countries are granted temporary derogations from the application of EU legislation (Schimmelfennig et al. 2022). Member States enjoy the freedom to refrain from joining in selected EU common policies. For instance, today only 20 out of 27 Member States have a common currency, the Euro.

Phased integration, on the other hand, does not yet exist. It pertains to candidate Member States, for example, West Balkan states (Damjanovski et al 2023). It can take the form of gradual sectoral integration of candidate Member States in which some countries would step-by-step join the EU regarding specific policy clusters or sectors (e.g., the Common Agricultural Policy – CAP); or the form of gradual horizontal integration in which countries must increase their performance across the whole set of policy domains and are then compensated with larger financial support and partial institutional participation in the EU (Blockmans and Emerson 2022).

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Greek policy advisors and experts are in favor of differentiated integration in conjunction with EU enlargement. For them, differentiated integration is a useful mechanism to enhance European integration, as it provides opportunities for willing EU Member States to close ranks in successive policy sectors. Yet, there are tendencies contradicting differentiated integration. “On the one hand, no EU Member State may want to make an additional step towards deeper integration. Witness the difficulties of EU’s economic governance. On the other hand, in the current, war-torn world, not differentiation, but unity among EU Member States is required” (J. Emmanouilidis, personal interview, 07.11.2023). Anyway, one should accept that differentiated integration is already a reality. By contrast, phased integration is not.

Greek policy advisors and experts support implementing phased integration for candidate countries as the way forward for EU enlargement. This is so, despite strong voices warning that “the previous waves of EU enlargement already diluted the idea of European Union and led the Europeans to take distances from the EU” (V. Hatzopoulos, personal interview, 23.10.2023). For most policy experts, Greece benefits from EU’s enlargement and should help accomplish it, while “phased integration gives Candidate Member States something to believe in” (J. Emmanouilidis, personal interview, 07.11.2023). Meanwhile, Greece should not forego “the opportunity to participate in the inner core of decision-making on differentiated integration” (J. Emmanouilidis, personal interview, 07.11.2023), because it is linked to enlargement in which Greece wants to play a role.

Indeed, “differentiated and phased integration must go together” (L. Tsoukalis, personal interview, 06.12.2024). “Differentiated integration is a precondition for EU’s further enlargement” (V. Hatzopoulos, personal interview, 23.10.2024). After enlargement takes place, differentiated integration will be a necessary mechanism for the EU. New Member States will face difficulties in catching up with the older ones regarding the total range of EU policies”; and - in view of Russia’ aggression - “the EU should upgrade enlargement to the East to its top priority” (P.C. Ioakeimidis, personal interview, 24.10.2023).

Despite the geopolitical significance of EU enlargement to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, “it would be paradoxical – and even dangerous – not to admit the West Balkan (WB) countries first” (A. Kritikos, personal interview, 24.10.2023). Admittedly, however, enlargement is a two-way street. The EU too should not only lay out “a time plan of enlargement including milestones for candidate countries, but also commitments on the part of the EU towards WB countries. These will be concrete actions which the EU will carry out to support the candidate countries to meet EU requirements for accession” (A. Kritikos, personal interview, 24.10.2023).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of conclusions

The main question of this Policy Brief was what opportunities and difficulties the Greek political and technocratic elites and the Greek government perceive on the road to EU's internal transformation and enlargement. In the Brief, several topics were discussed: the reform of institutional processes such as the Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in EU institutions, EU enlargement and differentiated integration, the accession of West Balkan (WB) candidate member states into the EU, and the linkages between EU's further integration and enlargement.

Greece's policy on EU enlargement has been very supportive specifically for Southeast European countries at least since the Thessaloniki summit (2003). Greece however also used opportunities, such as vetoing prospective membership, in the case of North Macedonia until 2018 when the Prespes Agreement was signed. Greek support to Southeast European countries lost steam during the long economic crisis of the 2010s in Greece. The economic and diplomatic role of Greece in the region became weak. After the Macedonian name dispute was resolved and the economic crisis was overcome, Greece was able to "return" to Southeast Europe.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 made enlargement primarily a geopolitical exercise rather than a test of political and economic standards that candidate Member States still have to reach to achieve EU accession.

Enlargement's significance was underscored in the European Council's meetings in 2023, the last of which took place in December 2023 after the EU-Balkans meeting. The European Council decided the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and granted Georgia EU candidate status (under certain preconditions).

In view of the war in Ukraine, other external challenges to the EU by Russia and China, and rising tensions in the Middle East, Greece supports EU's conceptualization of enlargement, not only as an economic and political project, but as a geostrategic investment. For instance, the Greek government is in line with its EU partners regarding the need for Bosnia and Herzegovina to show progress regarding membership criteria and for North Macedonia to proceed with constitutional reform. Greece also supports the European Council's decision to implement a growth plan for West Balkan candidate members to effect "faster integration and socioeconomic convergence" (European Council 2023). While the December 2023 Council postponed internal reforms until the summer of 2024, i.e., after the European Parliament elections, Greece was in favor of further EU reforms leading to deeper integration. But Greece holds on to its reservations regarding the abolition of the right to veto in EU voting procedures.

However, in the Greek national parliamentary elections of 2023 the future of the EU hardly appeared in the electoral agenda of political parties. Compared to the years of the crisis, when Greece was consumed by its own problems, today there is both political stability and room for thinking about the country's contribution to EU affairs.

Greece's Response to the Challenges of Deepening EU Integration and Further Enlargement*Recommendations*

In view of the above, some recommendations may be outlined:

Greece needs to rethink about the extent to which it can continue walking a very thin line between strongly supporting the deepening of EU integration and firmly holding on the right to veto in crucial policy domains (security, foreign affairs, enlargement). Obviously, Greece is not alone in facing such a dilemma, but it is by now one of the oldest EU Member States. It may want to consider playing a leadership role among countries in a similar position.

If Greece holds a firm position regarding the right to veto, it needs to form alliances within the EU. It may turn to other small EU countries, such as some of the South European or East European countries, to form constructive alliances. Their purpose would be to put forward innovative ideas on how reform EU institutions and processes, so that small EU Member States are not marginalized, while the EU at last assumes a role as a cohesive global power of like-minded states.

Finally, Greek officials need to be clear about the country's interests regarding deeper EU integration and enlargement and then submit their preferences and positions to public debate. Otherwise, the public will not be informed about options for EU reform and enlargement, and the Greek government will be unfit to participate in the relevant negotiations. In that case, Greece may resort to the familiar, but undeserved pattern of just following the emerging EU consensus that would be shaped by other Member States.

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