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## BOOK PRESENTATION: “DOES EU MEMBERSHIP FACILITATE CONVERGENCE? THE EXPERIENCE OF EU EASTERN ENLARGEMENT”

Lucia Husenicová\*

On Friday April 9, 2021 Faculty of Political Science and International Relations held, in cooperation with book editors **Istvan Pal Szekely** and **Michael Landesman**, a moderated online discussion with the aim to present their new book and discuss issues of current importance for the European Union.

The discussion was co-chaired by **Lucia Husenicova** and **Vladimir Müller** of the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations. In addition to the two co-editors **Istvan Pal Szekely** – principal advisor in European Commission DG Economic and Finance and **Michael Landesman** – former scientific director of Vienna Institute of International Economic Studies, the panellists included also **Otilia Dhand** – managing director with TENEO, a risk advisory organization in Brussels and **Martin Kahanec** – head of School of Public Policy at Central European University and founder and scientific director of CELSI.

The book *Does EU Membership Facilitate Convergence?* was published in 2021 in two volumes with chapters authored by multitude of authors from Central and Eastern European countries. The main idea of the book is to discuss the impact of EU enlargement that has started on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004 and ended with accession of Croatia in 2013. In this period, the EU has admitted 11 new member states (referred in the book as EU11) with different historical experience and at different stage of economic and societal development comparing to the original, or the so-called old member states.

As the topic the book covers is immense, the content of the two volumes is divided. The first volume of the book introduces the analytical framework used in the research and focuses on countries' individual experience. The second volume

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\* Mgr. Lucia Husenicová, PhD. is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Security Studies, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Kuzmányho 1, 974 01 Banská Bystrica, Slovak Republic, e-mail: lucia.husenicova@umb.sk.

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is closely looking at the channels of interaction between EU and the EU11, especially at the channels relevant for the main topic of the book – convergence.

The main research questions of these two volumes are: What impact did the EU have on the convergence process in EU11? What difference did it make, relative to other converging economies, that these countries were part of a closely knit supranational organisation?

Convergence in this publication means that the outcome in the specific area is closing on to the level observable in the group of countries belonging to the EU. The particular chapters are focusing on processes of economic, social and institutional convergence. The economic convergence is easily measurable based on available statistics of per capita GDP, household income, income inequality, FDIs and export values and finances. The institutional convergence is possible to track through adopted legislation which was important part of the accession process. The most problematic to assess is the social convergence, as it covers the everyday life quality and satisfaction of individual citizens. Additionally, the authors of the book are also looking at the challenges and changes in the convergence when originally high levels of it in all three areas are decreasing due to recent developments and crises the EU as a whole is undergoing.

When looking at the conclusions, the book states that the economic convergence was the most successful, even though there have been differences among the EU11, which is natural. This rapid economic convergence, however, was not followed with the institutional one. Even if it was important part of the accession the reality showed the adoption of the EU regulations does not always translates into actual behaviour of institutions. In social convergence it seems that there were differences in impacts of EU membership on different parts and groups within society. The educated and skilled groups living in cities have profited more and reached quality of life comparable with original members. The rural areas in different countries are lacking behind. Overall, the publication of these volume is an important factor in the research about EU integration and also development of the EU in the future.

The discussion that followed was evolving around several important topics. First and foremost, the conclusions of the presented volumes were discussed by all the panellists. All of them stressed the meaning of the volume for better understanding of the impact of integration process. The discussion swiftly moved to current issues and topics. **Martin Kamanec** has stressed the importance to look at the process of the integration of members through the lenses of what he

called an ontological insecurity. He emphasised the need to acknowledge the historical differences between EU11 and the other member states, especially when it comes to the EU as such and processes and mechanisms it is based on. There are significant differences in perception of specific issues between member states, that are affected by different perception of their own realities. This is an important point that needs to be taken into consideration when we are talking about future of the EU, and any possibilities of enlargement. **Otilia Dhand** assessed the issues of political stability in EU11 based mainly on the social convergence problematic. She has emphasized the need not to perceive the populations of individual member states as a unified group. There are significant differences between how political, economic and social realities are perceived in the rural and city areas. Especially these different perceptions are playing rather significant role in politics in most of the EU member countries, not only in EU11. We have a group of citizens overall EU who have the feeling of neglect by the political elites and existing institution.

The discussion continued in addressing the main challenges not only the EU11 but the whole EU is facing recently regarding the coronavirus pandemic. The panellists agreed that the current situation has presented several challenges to the EU, which have been reflected in decreasing support of the integration in some of original member states, but also in aspiring candidate countries. However, the panellists agreed that the crisis represents a positive stimulus for the EU institutions. The special development package which was rather fast approved by the EU institution proves ability of the institutions to react to ongoing development.

The panellists have also briefly touched upon the issue of democratic backsliding that is taking place all over western established democracies and is not avoiding the EU11. Poland, Hungary but also Slovenia were all mentioned as examples of these trends, with Hungary being the most advanced in its deconstructing its democracy through the introduction of new legislation.

Towards the end of the discussion a several challenges were mentioned, especially the growing scepticism towards the EU not only among citizens but also among politicians in different EU member states (not only EU11).

The two presented volumes represent a significant publication relevant to the academia and practitioners in their effort to understand the unique process of European integration. The process has started as a visionary peace project with deep developmental intentions especially in economic area. Over the last 70 years it has evolved in ambitious yet complicated and complex institution.

Studying how the new member states managed to adjust to their membership but also how the EU and original members were impacted is an important step in understanding where this project can evolve in the future. We have to be worried of the ongoing processes in all member states especially when looking at the social stability and economic security of all groups of citizens.

The EU integration is not a closed process, it is a still ongoing development. In all of the countries that have joined EU since 2004 we can see movement towards convergence in all three researched areas. Naturally, there are differences as the countries had different starting points when the process started. The set-backs the integration is currently undergoing are also part of the process, but it depends on the political elite but also citizens where the EU is heading in its future and what roads will it take to improve the overall quality of life of all of us.