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**28th Annual Conference of Central European  
Political Science Association (CEPSA)  
“Twenty Years of EU Membership: Lessons Learned,  
Challenges and Opportunities” Kaunas,  
Lithuania 3rd–4th of October 2024**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of October 2024, the International 28<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA) took place in Kaunas, Lithuania, commemorating the 20th anniversary of the accession of eight Central and Eastern European (CEE) states, along with Cyprus and Malta, to the European Union in 2004, which finally ended the division of Europe after the Second World War. For many of these countries, joining the EU meant a return to their rightful place as Europeans. Despite years of totalitarian rule, the people of CEE countries never stopped claiming their European identity.

For Europe, the EU enlargement presented a unique opportunity to unify a previously divided continent and extend the peace project across most of the region while continuing to build the entire continent on the same set of values: democracy, the rule of law, and the respect for fundamental freedoms and rights. For the new EU member countries, EU accession required a decade of reforms necessary for implementing the so called ‘acquis’, convincing citizens that feared the idea of opening the market and overcoming reluctance in Member States towards enlargement.

The conference was organized by the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy at Vytautas Magnus University, in collaboration with the Lithuanian Political Science Association and CEPSA. The conference organizing committee was chaired by Associate Professor Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė. The international organizing committee included Professor Miro Haček, President of CEP-

SA from the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, Assoc. prof. Petr Just, General Secretary of CEPSPA from the Metropolitan University Prague in Czech Republic, Assoc. prof. Sima Rakutienė, Aistė Žemaitytė and Rimgaile Kasparaitė from Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania, Assoc. prof. Liutauras Gudžinskas, acting President of the Lithuanian Political Science Association from Vilnius University in Lithuania.

The CEPSPA conference in Kaunas was a great success, with more than 180 paper proposals received and 152 presentations delivered. In total of over 160 participants attended both days of the conference. Many of the participants were many representatives of various universities from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Lithuania, Austria, and Croatia. Representatives from Montenegro, Romania, Latvia, Estonia, Serbia, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Finland Republic of Ireland and India also attended the conference. The conference brought together political science researchers to engage in insightful discussions, reflections, and analyses of the main achievements and lessons learned by Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, which are members of the European Union, over the past two decades, as well as the challenges they have faced and the opportunities that lie ahead. The conference served as a platform for interdisciplinary exchange and the development of the new perspectives.

On 3 October, the conference was opened by Vytautas Magnus University's Vice-Rector, Prof. Vilma Bijekienė, the President of CEPSPA, Prof. Miro Haček, and the Dean of Political Science and Diplomacy, prof. Šarūnas Liekis. The participants of the conference were greeted by Prof. Liudas Mažylis, a member of the European Parliament. The keynote speech "No Country for Eurosceptic Men? Transformation and Europeanisation of Lithuania" was delivered by Prof. Mindaugas Jurkynas, former Jean Monnet Chair at the Faculty of Political Science and Diplomacy at VMU. The speech inspired the subsequent discussions among the political science researchers on the achievements and challenges of EU membership.

The two-day conference featured six sessions and 29 panels. The majority of the panel discussions focused on EU matters: Experiences and perspectives of CEE countries in the EU, of EU Enlargement and Integration processes, European Parliament Elections in CEE countries, Local governments in CEE: Concept of European community-led development, Citizen' Trust and Attitudes towards the EU, EU as international actor: policies and impact. Popular topics of discussion included international relations and security issues. In total, eight panel discussions focused on the following topics: 'Security and defense policy processes in the transatlantic security community and their implications for the Baltic States'; 'Foreign policy perspectives in Central Europe'; 'Security of European

nations in the era of hybrid threats'; 'The Russian war in Ukraine'; 'Security studies and cooperative strategies'. Contemporary political issues such as populism, democratic backsliding, migration policy, conspiracy theories and manipulation were also addressed. Conference presentations discussed topics relating to political communication, public policy and political ideologies.

As the discussions revealed, the 20 years since 2004 EU enlargement have undoubtedly brought about significant positive changes to the CEE countries, fostering economic development, political consolidation and regional integration. The accession process required significant improvements in democratic institutions, governance and the rule of law. The CEE countries have made progress in consolidating democratic practices and upholding European values, contributing to political stability in the region. These countries have actively participated in EU decision-making, with leaders from the region occupying key positions in EU institutions and successfully holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. This active engagement has allowed them to influence policies that directly affect their interests and concerns. EU membership has fostered citizen engagement in the political processes of the CEE countries. Participation in European Parliament elections and other EU-related activities has increased, fostering a sense of European identity among citizens. EU membership has contributed to the development of the CEE countries in many ways, but these countries have also contributed to the development of the EU.

Despite these achievements, CEE countries have continued to face significant challenges. Economic disparities persist, with rural areas lagging urban centers and contributing to social inequalities. Some countries have seen concerns emerge about democratic backsliding, raising questions about their commitment to the rule of law and democratic values. The rise of populist movements and nationalist sentiments in certain countries highlights the fragile equilibrium between national identity and European integration.

Security challenges have also emerged, notably in the context of Russia's assertive actions in the region and its war in Ukraine. Issues such as energy dependence on Russia, cyber-security vulnerabilities and the strengthening of defense capabilities require collective responses from both individual countries and the EU. Finding the right balance between engaging with neighboring countries and maintaining a united front within the EU remains a complex diplomatic challenge. As the CEE countries continue to navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape, the lessons of the past two decades will play a crucial role in shaping their future within the European Union.

Through the research, debate, and collaboration, conference attendees have deepened their understanding of the critical issues facing Europe. They have

also discovered ways to contribute to policymaking and propose innovative solutions to the challenges we face as a region.

The CEPESA Council meeting took place during the conference. The Council elected the new CEPESA leadership team: Prof. Boglarka Koller from Hungary as President and Prof. Agnieszka Kasinska-Metryka as Vice-President, and Prof. Simona Kukovič as General Secretary. The next CEPESA annual conference was scheduled to take place in Warsaw on 18 and 19 of September 2025.