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Hegemony in the European Union?

Why does the phenomenon of hegemony appear in the European Union itself? How can it be affected by the institution of enhanced cooperation? How can Poland react?

The European Union can be defined as a social system undertaking actions through the performance of state functions. The system does not cover all state functions, but those embraced are regulated by the *acquis communautaire*. The European Union is therefore not only a system of actions but a system of communication (meaning concepts, procedures, and values). However, since foreign policy making has currently been given unprecedented prominence as a presentational phenomenon, then has also become a part of the process of perception. In other words, we are dealing with a complex system of actions regulating the flow of goods, capital, services, persons and information, where collective identities, interests, and norms interact with one another to form the European Union as a new, unique actor (subject).

The European Union is evolving. The next stage of its evolution will be determined by the outcome of the current discussions regarding the EU Constitution. But before the European Union transforms into a confederation or federation, or before it disintegrates or plunges into institutional stagnation, the dynamics of its processes are and for a long time to come will be shaped by the states. The present diversification within the European Union is first and foremost a derivative of the diversification among its member states. The most important place in the hierarchy of factors affecting the EU is comprised by the states themselves. This type of system certainly could not exist without a dynamic hierarchy of constituent components. The political aspect of this hierarchy cannot be overlooked here. It is mainly expressed by the varying

amounts of effort spent by the respective member states on the process of forming an effective functioning European Union.

This difference in the efforts expended by individual states was already present at the inception of the European Communities. It is essentially irremovable, even if subject to far-reaching modifications. These changes are partially the outcome of the policies of the respective governments, which are to some extent independent of social processes (prudent policy-making must also incorporate the effects of these processes).

It must be acknowledged that the European Union is complex, and not only because its dynamic is a derivative of the operations of unique subsystems embodied in the form of member states. The Union is also complex because its very structure is a part of a broader system. This systemic mediation makes the stability of the European Union subject to strong stimuli, both internal and external.

As a result the stability of the European Union chiefly depends on the level of its self-referentiality, i.e. on how fast the size of the systemic memory is growing. This memory is cumulative in nature and gradually makes the system emerge out of its international surroundings. The system then becomes self-sufficient and the external factors affecting it are filtered through the regulations applying to all its components. In other words, the stability of the European Union will increase in proportion to the cohesion it displays while performing an expanding array of state functions.

In an attempt to grasp the idea of hegemony, it can be assumed that a hegemon is a state (or group of states) that significantly affects the functionalities of a system. In this sense, hegemony does not denote domination, which is governance or management as the result of the outcome of elections or self-appointed action, but rather a type of leadership in a system—an expression of advantage in aspects that are decisive in defining the position of the hegemon within a group of states making up the system. The acknowledgement of hegemony is proportional to the level of common interests of the system's members which the hegemon represents. It can be conceptually positioned in between domination and legitimate management. The same holds true of a group hegemon.

Intuitively speaking, if a hegemonic centre is complex in structure, i.e. comprises two or more states, then its stability is obviously weaker than that of a single-state hegemon, whereas the impact of a hegemon comprised of a greater number of states is

more effective since such a hegemon has a greater share in the system than even the most important member state (action), is better ensconced in the executive bodies of the system (communication) and is more accepted within the system (perception).

Since none of the European Union member states can aspire to be the only hegemon in the system and the phenomenon of hegemony is inherently present in any such system, then the pragmatic stance of any government would be to integrate the state into that group of states which constitutes the centre of hegemony.

Enlargement of the European Union temporarily increases the level of diversification and thus instability.¹ It affects the actions, and perhaps even the shape, of the centre of hegemony.

The composition and impact of the group hegemon poses a serious problem for the governments of each of the member states. The problem can be challenged by a naïve negation of the phenomenon of hegemony, demagogic protests, by ignoring hegemony or fighting it, by issuing cutting comments on directorates, domination, new colonialism, empires, dictates, etc., or by using a wide array of means of this type.

However, once the government concludes that it is a member of such a hegemonic group, or stands a good chance of becoming one, it will have to resort to different actions.

It is easier to describe aspects that determine the advantage of a hegemon than it is to provide an exhaustive description of the

¹ “The population will grow by 30% and the national income by 8%—this is but one indicator of diversification. Institutional diversification will also ensue. Tensions within the EU following the enlargement will also increase rather than dwindle for some time. It is true that the whole system of the Union is focused on bridging the gaps in the rate of development. The results of various simulations predict, among other things, the length of time needed for the new member states to attain the average level of the enlarged EU. The time perspective here is one generation. The first dozen or so years following the enlargement will be especially difficult, since the negative consequences of diversification will be factors exerting serious influence during this time. Poland’s semi-peripheral position in the world system has a long origin and perhaps that is why, despite the collapse of the state socialism and the focus on an alternative system, the gravitation of Poland towards the centre of the governing world system will be neither easy nor short-term. Disparities in development are always a source of tension. Interregional tensions within a state can both stimulate and retard development. Likewise, tensions between the member states of the European Union are a great opportunity for the member states, but can also be an obstacle if changes in the level of diversification, measured by the efforts to level out the differences within the

common interest of the system's members. The scope of the common interest can, however, be defined in terms of the *acquis communautaire*, and its potential content, in the debate on the system and functions of the European Union, notably in that debate focused on its constitution.

When referring to the phenomenon of hegemony, governmental policy must maximize the effects of the *acquis*, shape the *acquis* in accordance with its national interest, and simultaneously adopt such a position in the constitutional debate that the future constitution is most conducive to achieving the goals set by a particular government. What is striking here is the conciliatory character of intrasystemic relations in the European Union, while the phenomenon of hegemony in the world system is a combination of conciliation and power relations.

The European Union has elaborate convergence mechanisms. They hinder the assumption of a hegemonic position by one state or a very small group of states. There exists an institution, however, that in the long term facilitates the formation of a hegemonic centre encompassing on average a few member states of the European Union after enlargement. This institution is known as enhanced cooperation, developed in the Treaty of Nice.²

As a member of the EU Poland should strive to be admitted to the system of enhanced cooperation whenever the first such project appears, or perhaps even be an initiator of such a project. The Visegrád Group can thus attain some prominence and be given a deeper sense of meaning by the initiation of a project of enhanced

EU, will be perceived in the member state (or group of states) as unsatisfactory over a long period of time. Regional disparities in development occurring within the states may in extreme cases lead to disintegration of the affected state. Along the same lines, disparities in development, either deepening or long-lasting, may weaken the EU. The economy is not the only factor involved here. The disintegration tendency can mean that those states which are poorly governed and inefficiently managed will drop out. Disintegration does not have to translate into institutional collapse. It could also express itself as a deepening and preserving of the existing discrepancies". R. Stemplowski, "Wielka koalicja na rzecz udanego debiutu Polski w Unii Europejskiej?", in: U. Kurczewska, M. Kwiatkowska, K. Sochacka (eds.) *Polska w Unii Europejskiej - Pocz tkowe problemy i kryzysy?*, Warszawa: PISM, 2002, p. 456.

² This institution requires the participation of at least eight states in each project. The Institute has been drawing attention to the potential implications of the long-term influence of this institution since Autumn 2000, however the institution itself still remains in the realm of theory rather than application. The last publication comes from 2002. "The relation between the temporary increase of disparities in development and the operation of the enhanced cooperation principle can be conducive to a wider application of sectoral agreements on

cooperation. First and foremost however, the partners of Poland in the Weimar Triangle should be invited to join in work on an enhanced cooperation project. A project put forward by the Weimar Triangle states could become an example of the integration of old and new members of the EU. Perhaps it would be possible to embrace the whole Visegrád Group in such a project?

The possibility of initiating such a project was signalled by remarks of the President and the prime minister. The Polish Press Agency reported on November 7, 2002 that “according to President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the current government faces a formidable task in defining the strategy of Poland after its accession to the European Union. It was an item on the agenda [...] of the meeting of the Cabinet Council (on November 6, 2002). According to the President ‘membership in the EU is not like buying a ticket for a train that moves at its own pace, but rather everyday strengthening the position of a state within the EU structures’. He underscored that this strengthening of position is a matter of concern for economic development, competitiveness of the state, science, education, and culture. Prime Minister Leszek Miller stressed that it is the intellectual dimension (that is, all that is related to science, research, and the development of information technology) that will shape Poland’s role and prominence in the enlarged European Union. He also announced that as regards these aspects, the actions of the government will focus on five priorities: putting in place a stable system of science-to-economy transfer, singling out and selecting Polish specialties in science and technology, providing easy and quick access to the Internet, a stable system of continuous education, and computerized administration.”³

enhanced cooperation between the most developed countries of the EU. [...] The cumulative effect of the growing number of the agreements between the most developed countries may entail the emergence of an ever stronger *avant garde*, or core, or otherwise branded group of states that integrate most rapidly and, at the same time, fulfil their development potential to the maximum. Is this not leading to a deeper and more lasting division in the EU, a division that would separate the states on the basis of their level and perhaps even type of development? *Ibidem*, p. 457. Interest in this issue is scarce in Poland and the consultations of the Institute in 2003 with the Slovak and Portuguese experts, as well as a score of publications in other countries, have not been able to capture the public imagination in this area.

³ PAP Internet daily, e-mail edition (1131) of November 7, 2002, previously quoted in R. Stemplowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 458–459.

Instead of dreading hegemony and waiting to see what others will do, we must acknowledge the inevitability of systemic hierarchy in the European Union and attempt to optimise our position in the system in order to create more favourable hierarchies. These hierarchies should not replicate the existing disparities, but rather become a factor leading to convergence, stability, cohesion, and institutional development.

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