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EXPANSION OF THE BRICS INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION IN 2023–2024, NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR THE BRICS TRADE UNION FORUM

In the fall of 2023, during the ordinary 15th BRICS Summit, its participants, the heads of state of Brazil, Russia, India, China and the Republic of South Africa approved several applications to the international association, which expressed the desire of the governments of Argentina, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia to join BRICS. It should be noted that the number of officially submitted applications is significantly higher than those listed above for which an agreed decision has already been made. The diplomats of the BRICS countries, especially the South African party, as the 2023 chair, had a difficult task to select some of the applications and lay down the membership mechanisms that will apparently have to be used in the future. This stage was passed – at the end of the summit it was announced that applications from six new members had been approved, five of which (excluding Argentina) confirmed their intentions by the end of 2023 and were involved in the process of becoming members.

This process, for all its formal simplicity, is quite labor-intensive and complicated in practice. The complexity is related to the fact that in 2024 the BRICS presidency plan proposed by the Russian Federation envisages more than 200 different events, ranging from ministerial and departmental meetings with preparatory rounds, an extensive program of events through inter-parliamentary, business, trade, expert, trade union and other non-governmental, scientific, educational, sports, cultural, youth, women's and other organizations, the mechanisms of preparation and conduct of which have been shaped over the past fifteen years. It is an extremely complex and resource-intensive task to get involved in all elements of the multilayered interaction taking place within the preparation for the summit, and sometimes on the independent tracks of cooperation. Each such meeting requires not only the participation of delegates from the BRICS countries, but also preparatory work with draft documents, extensive organizational preparation, overcoming language barriers and, of course, understanding of common goals, problems and ways of solving problems. Ultimately, during these contacts each participant and each organization must find and work out a benefit or outcome that justifies the time and resources spent.

Understanding the complexity of gaining real membership in BRICS will come to the new participants in time, hopefully by the end of the Russian presidency this process will be completed.

It would be a mistake and misconception to view applying for membership as a purely formal process. It is clear that making such decision is influenced by both external conditions – the emerging multi-component geopolitical situation – and internal motives, the combination of which leads to the application. Much has been said and written about the geopolitical situation. Discussions of the transition from a “unipolar system” to a “multipolar world” are on everyone's lips, there are quite categorical assessments of the “end of the Eurocentrism era” and others like them. Such political formulas are not born from nothing. Objective comparative economic indicators of the development of countries, divided into three worlds in the 19th century, have blurred the boundaries of these conventional “worlds”. This happened not only in the reports of consulting agencies and organizations deriving a variety of comparative indices. First of all, this happened in the development subjects themselves, which, after gaining independence and overcoming political colonialism, found themselves facing the intractable problems of economic neocolonialism, from the power of which it was impossible to escape only through their own efforts.

Large national states, which faced with internal problems of overcoming poverty, economic development, improvement of education and health care systems, as well as with the need to solve many other problems, find themselves managed by the existing world financial system, by international capital, large transnational corporations, international organizations that are supposed to assist their establishment and development, but in fact only putting new layers of networks on these countries to restrain their growth, imposing on them the rules and conditions which are sometimes in direct opposition to their national ambitions. Loans with additional conditions and obligations, “development” programs with imposed participation of large foundations and corporations in the sphere of health care, agriculture, regulation of demographic policy, education, poverty reduction – all these mechanisms of neo-colonial policy, worked out for decades, sooner or later, usually in the process of gaining economic stability, force the nationally-oriented elites of the Third World countries to look for the ways to bypass them, the ways to gain sovereignty and true liberation from the now international, global colonial dependence without the traditional metropolis, but with all its signs and attributes of containment and coercion.

It was in the 1920s of this century that the processes of searching for an alternative system of relations to replace the hegemonic and globalist one were in demand to such an extent that applications to join the BRICS became widespread. The hopes of the new BRICS members are primarily related to the principles of BRICS policymaking and decision-making, about which much has been said and written. The principles of equality and mutual respect, non-interference in internal affairs, recognition of the right to choose

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one's own civilizational identity are the minimum that guarantees the acquisition of political subjectivity for new members. They also see attractiveness in economic prospects, namely, in receiving loans from the funds of the New Development Bank, without political conditions and under-hand agreements. They see mutual settlements in national or digital currencies that are not linked to the existing dollar-based global financial system as very encouraging. And in general, diverse interaction, which is based on an interested dialogue, counter interest, have much more prospects in mutual relations than the "rule-based order" dictated by "partners" from the countries of the "golden billion".

A few words about the trade union movement in the countries which applications have been approved for the BRICS membership. The BRICS Trade Union Forum, founded in 2012 on the sidelines of a high-level conference under the auspices of the ILO in Moscow, is certainly interested in ensuring that the interests of workers in these countries are protected, at least within the parameters of the fundamental conventions developed by the International Labor Organization on a tripartite basis, and that workers in these countries are represented in the Forum by their traditional organizations – trade unions. Without delving into the national peculiarities of the labor legislation of the new member countries, it is possible to single out among them the states where trade union activity is not permitted, or is built on a model markedly different from the traditional trade union model we are accustomed to. These include the UAE, Saudi Arabia and, to a certain extent, Iran. Based on the principles of non-interference in internal affairs, associate membership in the BRICS Trade Union Forum may be granted to the organizations representing workers' interests that are not trade unions. This approach, at least, will be promoted by Russian trade unions as new organizations gain membership.

The main task to be solved during the admission of new members to the BRICS Trade Union Forum is to ensure that the workers of the new member countries are represented and have a voice in the discussion of problems and in the development of solutions. It should be mentioned that the Rules of the BRICS Trade Union Forum, adopted in the revised version in 2022, will need to be supplemented with a special annex describing the procedural points related to the admission of the new member organizations. In the Forum's practice, all technical work to fill in the content of the next year falls on the shoulders of the leading trade union center of the presiding country. In 2024, all substantive issues are handled by the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia, including formalizing the admission of the new members to the Forum.

In addition to the domestic legislation, the process of the new members integration will be greatly influenced by the state of the economies of the accession countries, the level of welfare of the bulk of workers, the employment structure, national and cultural customs, and other issues placed by workers in the focus of their working life. In this respect, the differences of the new member countries from each other are quite noticeable. While Saudi Arabia ranks 11th in the world ranking in terms of industrial output with a population of 35,210,000, Ethiopia ranks 75th with a population of 124,757,000. Such marked differences will be reflected in the tasks that the workers' representatives of each particular country will set for themselves and the problems

that they will bring to the fore in developing joint solutions. At the same time, whatever the national priorities of delegates from different countries may be, the principle of decision-making in the Trade Union Forum, based on the rule of consensus building, will make it possible to find a balanced agreement on any issue under discussion.

Many experts discussing the first steps of BRICS enlargement began to talk about this phenomenon as a continuous and rapid process that will inevitably lead to the formation of a new political-economic reality in the near future. They believe that in five years, the geo-economic and political environment will be fundamentally different from the current one. I'm not inclined to share these predictions. If the changes are going to happen so rapidly, the process of adding new members to the BRICS will not be the main catalyst for such events. From where we stand today, the main goal is not so much to increase the number of member countries or the number of trade union centers in those countries that have joined the Trade Union Forum, but to fine-tune the expansion process itself and integrate the new members into inter-union interaction. The abstract ideas of growing the scale of the BRICS association and the Trade Union Forum as part of it will not be an end in itself.

Over the years, since its creation, BRICS has had no expansionist goals. I can't recall an instance where our membership organizations in the Trade Union Forum promoted the ideas of expansion for competitive purposes or confrontation. Whether it was China's initiative to hold BRICS meetings in the BRICS+ format, or South Africa's practice of using an expanded outreach meeting format. The goals of openness, informing, participating in discussions without any hint of the need to unite to fight anyone have always been prioritized. Of course, except for poverty, inequality, underdevelopment, epidemics and other economic and social plagues of social and political life.

The BRICS Trade Union Forum will undoubtedly follow the BRICS expansion policy developed at the summits and will make every effort to integrate new membership organizations into its work, however, the observers and experts are unlikely to see any great advances in this regard. On the sidelines of the BRICS Trade Union Forum, the issues of attitudes towards globality and globalization have been discussed many times. This issue became particularly prominent after the BRICS+ initiative, the specific boundaries of which were never formalized and could be understood both extremely broadly, at a globally significant level, and more narrowly, in an applied sense, within the framework of, for example, the implementation of China's One Belt, One Road initiative. The term globalization can hardly be applied to the BRICS Trade Union Forum because of its compromised linkage to economic globalization in the interests of cross-border movement and the use of capital, followed by political power over national sovereignties, legislations and civilizational choices of different countries. The term of becoming global, which has a more precise and politically neutral meaning, is more acceptable.

By now, in the trade union movement, globalization has taken its final form and is realized through the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), headquartered in Brussels, and through several global union associations built on a sectoral basis. The creation of the ITUC, formed in 2006 through the merger of the International Confederation of

Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labor (WCL), was the final stage in the unification of major trade union forces that share the ideas of trade union independence and liberalism. The founders went through their genesis, put forward the slogans “Freedom through Economic and Political Democracy” and others, and gradually moved away from the social doctrine of Christianity, responding to the challenge of secularism. During the period of the USSR and the block confrontation, the ICFTU, in particular, distinguished itself by its anti-communist stance. After the ITUC formation, the world trade union movement made an attempt to get rid of politicization and strengthened its positions, especially after the entry of trade unions of the former socialist camp and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia. The new single global inter-union structure was able to build a trade union policy harmonized with sectoral unions and gain leverage over international trade union affairs in the UN structures and other global institutions.

If in this context we discuss the emergence of a new global trade union structure on the basis of the BRICS alliance, a set of political and technical problems must be solved in order to gain global status. Without getting into details, it can be noted that the trade union organizations

being members of BRICS did not consider their structure as a base for such a global project until recently, as there were no sufficient grounds for it. However, further developments in the international environment, the position of global sectoral unions and other factors relating to the economic and political components of the international trade union movement may offer opportunities for development in this direction.

Note that the problem of forming a capable global center of the labor movement has no easy solution. The history of the world trade union movement clearly points to the marked impact of the world politics on such processes. The division of the world trade union movement on ideological grounds in the 20th century took place in the post-war period, and the attitude of trade unions to the Marshall Plan and the political struggle that injected into the program documents of the largest national trade union centers of the Western countries, formed on the ideas of social-democratic reformism, a considerable charge of anti-communism, which actually turned them into an instrument of political struggle, were of no small importance in this process. Discussions on the further development of the world trade union movement continue and will certainly be covered in the trade union press.