

ADVANCING EU ENLARGEMENT: ITALY'S ROLE AND STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE ON THE WESTERN BALKANS' INTEGRATION

Tuesday 15 April 2025

10:30 – 13:45

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation - Aldo Moro room
Piazzale della Farnesina, 1
Rome

Working language: English

The European integration of the Western Balkans returned to the EU agenda as a geostrategic priority in light of the disruptive dynamics triggered by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In this context, the EU has provided new impetus and made important decisions in advancing accession negotiations with the Western Balkans countries, also by capitalizing on the current pro-enlargement momentum through tangible benefits by launching the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Yet, important challenges remain, from the difficulties enlargement countries face in implementing domestic reforms and resolving bilateral disputes to the potential emergence of new divisions among member states and the destabilizing influence of third-party actors, all of which could slow down the current momentum of the accession process. Against this backdrop, the event will offer an opportunity to evaluate recent progress, examine the current challenges, and explore concrete steps to accelerate and streamline the process in all its dimensions while safeguarding its credibility and sustainability.

The **first panel** will explore new integration dynamics in the region in light of the evolving political, economic, and geostrategic landscape. It will offer an occasion to discuss the advancement and persisting challenges of deepening regional cooperation and accelerating reforms to meet EU accession criteria, ensuring stability and economic resilience. Special attention will be paid to both the ambitions of some Western Balkan countries to conclude accession negotiations within the current EU institutional cycle (2024-2029), as well as to the new possibilities of access to the EU internal market even before accession where there is the highest potential and added value, thanks to the "Growth Plan". A key challenge remains ensuring that these interconnected processes – regional cooperation, gradual integration, and reforms – effectively reinforce each other, translating their potential synergies into tangible progress toward EU accession.

The **second panel** will examine how the EU is shaping its next enlargement, considering both the candidate countries and the evolving accession framework. A key focus will be how the Union is preparing internally, balancing institutional adaptation with the geopolitical necessity of enlargement. Italy, alongside other key partners, has been at the forefront of advocating for a more structured and pragmatic approach – one that accelerates tangible benefits for candidate countries' citizens while allowing the EU, in parallel, to adapt effectively. The discussion will explore different strategies by member states, assessing how they can sustain momentum and strengthen both the enlargement and the broader European integration project. Particular attention will be given to the management of common resources and the challenges posed by the upcoming negotiation of the next EU multiannual financial framework, which should take into account the current enlargement momentum.

PROGRAMME



10.00-10.30	Registration of participants
10.30-10.45	Welcome remarks MARIA TRIPODI, Undersecretary of State to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation MICHELE VALENSISE, President, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
10.45-12.15	SESSION I – Regional Challenges ahead of the Enlargement
Keynote	AMER KAPETANOVIC, Secretary General, Regional Cooperation Council
Speakers	ODETA BARBULLUSHI, Resident Professor, College of Europe Tirana EMIR DJIKIC, Trade Expert, Former Director Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) SIMONIDA KACARSKA, Director, European Policy Institute (EPI) OANA POPESCU ZAMFIR, Director and founder, GlobalFocus Center BOJANA SELAKOVIĆ, Program Director at Civic Initiatives and Coordinator of the Serbian Nation Convention on the European Union
Chair	MATTEO BONOMI, Senior fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
12.15-13.45	SESSION II – Which enlargement is the EU working on?
Keynote	NICOLA VEROLA, Director General for Europe and International Trade Policy, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
Speakers	KRISTOF BENDER, Deputy Chairman, European Stability Initiative (ESI) DONIKA EMINI, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) REMZI LANI, Executive Director, Albanian Media Institute NICOLETTA PIROZZI, Head of Programme - EU politics and institutions and Institutional Relations Manager, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) BARTOSZ WIELIŃSKI, Deputy editor-in-chief, Gazeta Wyborcza
Chair	LUISA CHIODI, Director, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT)
13.45	Light lunch

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