

Workshop

ENLARGEMENT POLICY THROUGH THE POST-2027 EU BUDGET: RESHAPING PRE-ACCESSION ASSISTANCE

7 July 2026

9:30-13:15

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
Via dei Montecatini, 17
Rome



The renewed geopolitical imperative of EU enlargement has prompted a broader reflection within the European Union on how to make the accession process more credible, effective and responsive to current strategic challenges. While enlargement has regained political momentum, longstanding concerns regarding reform implementation and institutional preparedness continue to shape discussions on the future of the process, particularly in the Western Balkans.

Against this backdrop, the proposal for the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) introduces significant changes to the architecture of EU external financing. The proposed Global Europe Instrument (GEI) would fully integrate pre-accession assistance into a single external action framework, while placing greater emphasis on performance-based financing and reform delivery. These changes raise important questions about the future governance of EU financial assistance, the effectiveness of conditionality, and the capacity of candidate countries to absorb and implement reforms.

For the Western Balkans, where the enlargement process has often been marked by periods of stagnation and reform fatigue, the evolution of EU financial instruments will play an important role in determining whether renewed political commitments can be translated into tangible outcomes. At the same time, growing EU priorities related to competitiveness, security and defence are likely to influence how resources are allocated within the future MFF, with potential implications for enlargement policy.

This closed-door workshop, organised within the framework of the InCLUDE initiative, aims to examine how the proposed financial architecture may reshape pre-accession assistance and support the EU's enlargement objectives. The discussion will bring together policymakers, experts and practitioners to assess the opportunities and challenges arising from the proposed reforms and their implications for the Western Balkans.

The discussion will focus on:

- the implications of the new Global Europe Instrument for candidate countries in the Western Balkans;
- the strengths and limits of performance-based financing and budget conditionality;
- complementary drivers of reform beyond financial incentives;
- how MFF resources can contribute to real economic and social convergence;
- the role of Italian institutions and private actors in supporting investment and development;
- the place of enlargement within wider EU priorities related to competitiveness, resilience and defence.

PROGRAMME

09.30-9.50	WELCOME COFFEE & REGISTRATION
9.50-10.00	OPENING REMARKS MARCO SIMONI , Director, IAI
10.00-11.15	SESSION 1 – CLOSING THE GAP: CONVERGENCE EVIDENCE AND INVESTMENT PRIORITIES UNDER THE POST-2027 EU BUDGET
Presentation	BRANIMIR JOVANOVIĆ , Economist, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw) – Presentation of the Converge2EU Scoreboard on real convergence between the Western Balkans and the EU
Inputs	ENRICO PETROCELLI , Head of International Institutional Relations, Cassa di Risparmio di Roma MICHAEL RON , Chief International Officer, SACE, Rome VALBONA ZENELI , Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council, Washington
Chair	MATTEO BONOMI , Head of Europe Programme, IAI, Rome
	<i>Guiding questions:</i> • What does the Converge2EU Scoreboard tell us about the state of real convergence between the Western Balkans and the EU? • Which gaps remain most significant, and what factors explain differences in performance across countries? • How can evidence on convergence outcomes inform priorities under the post-2027 EU budget? • What types of investments should receive greater support to translate enlargement into tangible improvements in citizens' everyday lives? • What role can Italian institutions and private actors play in supporting investment and real convergence in the Western Balkans? • How can Italy champion enlargement in an EU increasingly focused on competitiveness, resilience and defence?
11.15-11.45	COFFEE BREAK
11.45-13.00	SESSION 2 – GOVERNING PRE-ACCESSION ASSISTANCE: THE NEW MFF ARCHITECTURE AND ITALY'S ROLE
Presentation	STEFAN RISTOVSKI , IAI-OSF Western Balkans Fellow at Istituto Affari Internazionali, Researcher, European Policy Institute (EPI), Skopje – Presentation of a draft paper on the governance of pre-accession assistance under the post-2027 EU budget
Inputs	SABINA LANGE , Director, Think Europe VUK MARAS , Director of Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) Montenegro RAFFAELA DI EMIDIO , Senior Officer, Directorate of International Financial Relations, Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, Rome
Chair	MATTEO BURSI , Researcher, IAI, Rome

Guiding questions:

- What are the main governance innovations introduced by the new EU budget framework for enlargement countries?
- Does the shift towards performance-based financing strengthen or weaken the EU's leverage in driving reforms?
- How can the future system balance flexibility, accountability and predictability for candidate countries?
- What lessons from the implementation of previous pre-accession instruments should inform the governance of assistance under the post-2027 EU budget?
- How can candidate countries better engage member states to build political support for enlargement?
- What role can partnerships between governments, business communities and civil society play in advancing the enlargement agenda?

13.00-13.15 **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

NICOLETTA PIROZZI, Deputy Director, IAI, Rome

DUŠAN ŠABIČ, Program Analyst, Open Society Foundations - Western Balkans

Light lunch to follow