

Conference

New Visions for the Western Balkans-4th Edition

Preparing for Enlargement: Communicating Benefits and Accelerating Connectivity

20 October 2026
10:00-13:15

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

Over the past two years, EU enlargement has moved from a long-term aspiration back to the centre of the Union's agenda. The 2025 Enlargement Package confirmed that the momentum for enlargement remains strong and that the accession of new Member States, particularly in the Western Balkans, is increasingly within reach. At the same time, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Reform and Growth Facility have shifted the focus toward gradual integration, economic convergence and the delivery of concrete benefits to citizens before full accession. In this evolving context, the enlargement process increasingly depends not only on institutional reforms and political conditionality, but also on the ability to communicate its benefits effectively and to accelerate connectivity in ways that make integration tangible.

In this context, communication and connectivity are two key priorities for a credible and effective enlargement policy. Clearly conveying the tangible benefits of enlargement—to citizens both within the EU and in candidate countries—is essential to build trust, counter misinformation and sustain political support. At the same time, strengthening connectivity—across infrastructure, energy, digital networks and people-to-people exchanges, and through the regulatory alignment needed to sustain them—is crucial to make integration more concrete both ahead of and beyond formal accession.

This conference addresses these interlinked priorities, with a particular focus on EU–Western Balkans relations. It aims to explore how enlargement can be better supported, both by improving public communication and by delivering concrete results through targeted investments and regional cooperation. The first session will examine how to better communicate the economic, political and social benefits of enlargement; the second session will focus on connectivity as a driver of integration, looking at both investments and the regulatory framework underpinning them. In particular, it will consider how instruments such as the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) can be further developed to accelerate connectivity, also drawing on the experience of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) in promoting regulatory convergence and market integration. Particular attention will be given to regional frameworks such as the European Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, especially in light of Italy's Presidency, as platforms for advancing policy coordination, regulatory alignment and the implementation of connectivity projects across the region.

The conference is organized by the Istituto Affari Internazionali and the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, in cooperation with and with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and with the support of Fondazione CSF and the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation. Held in the framework of Italy's Presidency of the EUSAIR, the conference contributes to advancing Italy's priorities on regional connectivity, integration and strengthened cooperation between EU Member States and enlargement countries, reinforcing the strategic relevance of the Adriatic-Ionian region in the broader EU enlargement agenda.

With the support of

PROGRAMME

9:30-10:00	REGISTRATION OF PARTICIPANTS
10:00-10:30	WELCOME REMARKS ANTONIO TAJANI , Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy MICHELE VALENSISE President, Istituto Affari Internazionali
10:30-11:30	SESSION I – COMMUNICATING THE BENEFITS OF ENLARGEMENT <i>This panel will explore how to more effectively communicate the economic, political and social benefits of EU enlargement to different audiences, both within the European Union and in candidate countries. While enlargement has regained political momentum, public perceptions often remain fragmented and, at times, sceptical. Strengthening communication is therefore essential to build trust, counter misinformation and ensure sustained political support. The discussion will examine the role of institutions, policymakers, experts and civil society in shaping credible and evidence-based narratives around enlargement. It will also address key challenges, including how to better explain the concrete benefits of gradual integration, how to tailor messages to different national contexts, and how to bridge the gap between technical policy processes and public understanding.</i>
Panelists	VALENTINA SUPERTI , Director Western Balkans, DG ENEST, European Commission ALFREDO DURANTE MANGONI , Italian National Coordinator for the Central European Initiative, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy ULRIKE HARTMANN , Director of the Department for Southeast Europe and EU Enlargement, Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria UNA HAJDARI , Journalist, Politico, Brussels ENGJELLUSHE MORINA , Senior Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations
Moderator	LUISA CHIODI , Director, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT)
11:30-12:00	COFFEE BREAK
12:00-13:00	SESSION II – ACCELERATING CONNECTIVITY TO SUPPORT INTEGRATION <i>This panel will focus on connectivity as a driver of integration between the EU and the Western Balkans, addressing both its investment and regulatory dimensions. It will explore how strengthening transport, energy and digital networks—also through the contribution of regional frameworks such as the EUSAIR and the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative, especially in light of Italy’s Presidency—can support economic convergence and gradual integration into the EU single market. It will also consider how instruments such as the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) can be further developed to support regulatory alignment, also drawing on the experience of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs).</i>

Panelists	THOMAS BOTZIOS, Director for the Adriatic and the Western Balkans, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation PRANVERA KASTRATI, Director of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) Secretariat NENAD ĐURĐEVIĆ, Advisor to the President, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia KRISELA HACKAJ, Executive Director, Cooperation and Development Institute
Moderator	MATTEO BONOMI, Head of Europe Programme, Istituto Affari Internazionali
13:00-13:15	CONCLUDING REMARKS NICOLA VEROLA, Director General for Europe and International Trade Policy, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
13:15-14:00	LIGHT LUNCH