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The Western Balkans in the European Union: Enlargement to What, Accession to What?

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edited by Eleonora Poli

ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the proceedings of the international conference "The Western Balkans in the European Union: Enlargement to What, Accession to What?" organized in Rome on 5 April 2017 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali, the Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE), the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (ÖFZ/CFA), in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The conference saw the participation of high-level speakers from both the Western Balkans and the European Union. The aim of the conference was to establish possible paths towards enlargement for the Western Balkans at a time when the EU is affected by multiple and asymmetric crises. Participants in the conference outlined that Western Balkans' accession is a strategic opportunity for the EU to relaunch its economic connectivity and competitiveness, foster its role in the international arena as a key global player and enhance its internal and external security.

European Union | EU enlargement | Western Balkans



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by Sara Piacentini,

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Introduction

At a time when the European Union is affected by multiple and asymmetric crises, envisioning a European enlargement towards the Western Balkans seems far from being a realistic option. Yet, now more than ever, Western Balkans' accession to the EU is strategically important. It is an opportunity for the EU to relaunch its economic connectivity and competitiveness, to foster its role in the international arena as a key global player and to enhance its internal and external security. All these factors could help the EU to promote a positive narrative by revitalizing the integration project.

With this in mind, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), the Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE) and the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (ÖFZ/CFA), in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, organized a conference at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 5 April 2017.¹ The conference saw the participation of more than twenty European experts from the Balkan region and member countries, to discuss not only perspectives for accession countries but also the future of the EU ahead of the Trieste Summit on enlargement to be held, under Italian Presidency, on 12 July 2017.

¹ More information available at: <http://www.iai.it/en/node/7511>.

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¹ Report of the international conference "The Western Balkans in the European Union: Enlargement to What, Accession to What?" organized in Rome on 5 April 2017 in the run up to the Italian Summit on the Western Balkans by the Istituto Affari Internazionali, the Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE), the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (ÖFZ/CFA), in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

The Western Balkans in the European Union: Enlargement to What, Accession to What?

In her opening remarks, Secretary General of Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, **Elisabetta Belloni** underlined Italy's commitment to the Western Balkans and dedication to promoting enlargement through the Berlin Process, a diplomatic initiative on the future enlargement of the European Union, launched by Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin in 2014 and followed by the 2015 Vienna Summit and the 2016 Paris Summit, but also by supporting the successful and well-established activities of the Central European Initiative (CEI) and the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative.



Conference participants

Yet, as the Deputy Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, **Nathalie Tocci**, highlighted, to date enlargement is not an easy political sell. From being a technocratic process, involving the candidate countries and the Commission, enlargement has become highly politicized at a time when politics is often dominated by populist rhetoric. In this respect, the politicization of enlargement is having a very negative impact on the accession process per se, with anti-accession discourses fuelled both by rising nationalism and eurosceptic voices, which are questioning the very existence of the EU. Yet the politicization of enlargement could have a positive effect if it revitalizes frank debates on the future of the EU in a way that could help the EU and the Balkan region to move forwards, transforming a negative momentum into a new positive political context.

In this respect, as underlined by Belloni, although the Rome Declaration on the future of the EU, signed by the Heads of State and Government of 27 EU member states on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, has been criticized for not being ambitious enough in directly stressing the need to enlarge towards the Western Balkans, it nevertheless provides room for redefining a new narrative on the future of the EU, one that keeps its doors open to the Balkans. According to Tocci, the Western Balkans' countries should not be mere spectators. The Balkans should take responsibility for the future of Europe and be active in redefining the EU integration project, so as to rebuild a virtuous circle between the accession process and a reformed EU. To do so, as noted by Belloni, the Western Balkans have to effectively implement the required internal reforms, foster the rule of law, fight against corruption and, above all, overcome regional disputes. Indeed, there will be no EU enlargement without wider and deeper regional cooperation. On the other hand, to overcome in-house and external eurosceptic views, together with economic stagnation and nationalism, the EU and its member countries need to foster effective initiatives to promote economic growth in the region.

According to Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, **Vincenzo Amendola**, the Trieste Summit can be a platform from which to launch such processes. The summit aims to build on the achievements of previous summits by providing added value to the process, especially in the sectors of economic and transport connectivity. The aim is to win back public support by promoting reforms that will positively affect peoples' lives in



From left to right: Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, Edvig Morvai, Allan Jones

both the EU and the Western Balkans. For this reason, the Trieste Summit will not only promote the need for effective governance and the rule of law but also the development of forms of people-to-people connectivity, from cooperation among small and medium sizes enterprises to the support of the Civil Society Initiative. In other words, the Trieste Summit aims to foster inclusiveness, be it through a re-politicization of the enlargement process. Indeed, as observed by **Johannes Kyrle**, ÖFZ/CFA Secretary General, and **Hedvig Morvai**, Executive Director of the European Fund for the Balkans, the Berlin Process initiatives should not only focus on infrastructural and transport projects but also on democracy, people-to-people connectivity and civil societies.² Moreover, as highlighted by **Allan Jones**, Head of the European Commission Unit for Strategy, Policy and EEA/EFTA, communication is very important too: the results of the Berlin Process need to be delivered to all Europeans.

Following these introductory discussions, the conference was structured over three sessions. The first focused on the EU integration process and was chaired by Florent Marciaq, ÖFZ/CFA Research Director. The second session dealt with the politicization of enlargement and was chaired by Piero Fassino, former Italian MP and President of the Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI). The third and conclusive session, chaired by Tobias Flessenkemper, Senior Research Associate of CIFE, focused on connectivity and transformation in the Western Balkans.

First Session: Integration, Differentiation and the Future of Europe?

The past few years have witnessed an odd mix of integration, differentiation and disintegration in the EU. Integrationist moves, however incomplete, have been made on economic matters (e.g. banking union), border management (e.g. the European border and coast guard agency) and foreign policy (the EU Global Strategy

² See also the interview with Hedvig Morvai: *The role of civil society in the Berlin Process*, https://youtu.be/XYb_jjePX0g.

and its implementation). At the same time, the risk of disintegration looms large, with Brexit being the most notable case in point. According to **Florent Marciaq**, differentiated integration could also result in too many opt-outs for member countries, which will inevitably weaken the EU and its democratic institutions.

According to **Stefan Lehne** (Carnegie Europe), differentiated integration in the sense of a multispeed system of European governance outlined in the Rome declaration and featured in the White Paper recently published by Jean-Claude Juncker, could favour the integration of the Western Balkans. As stated by **Dušan Reljić** (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik), the Western Balkans are already integrated into EU trade, with its exports and imports



Ivan Vejvoda and Srdjan Cvijić

from and to Europe exceeding those of Russia. Moreover, the Western Balkans participate in programmes such as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus. Yet the Western Balkans need to do more to integrate into the EU. Large public debt, low economic performance, high unemployment rates and an ageing population risk making effective integration almost impossible. The EU should recognize this fact and act accordingly by opening EU structural funds to the Balkans before their accession to EU (as they did for Bulgaria and Romania) and the labour market. Furthermore, circular migration would permit better integration of human capital between the EU and the Balkans. On the other hand, according to **Srdjan Cvijić** (Open Society European Policy Institute) and **Aleksandar Petar Jovanovski** (European Policy Institute), boosting economic performance in the Western Balkans and fostering the rule of law, so as to fulfil all the Copenhagen criteria, would both favour Balkan citizens and promote EU legitimacy in the region. By contrast, to date, in order to win electoral consensus, populist parties and government in the Western Balkans are building on widespread eurosceptic views to discredit EU actions and echo a negative rhetoric on the inconsistency of the EU enlargement approach.

Second Session: The Politicization of Enlargement

While enlargement has long been perceived as a technocratic process, driven by EU institutions, the big bang enlargement and the enlargement fatigue that followed fundamentally changed this logic. EU enlargement policy seems now to have become a highly political process, partly steered by individual governments, and increasingly susceptible to public opinion. In this respect, the Berlin Process, while it cannot substitute the enlargement process per se, can certainly develop a positive enlargement narrative for the Western Balkans. Indeed, as underlined by **Piero Fassino**, the role of national governments and intergovernmental cooperation has always played a fundamental role in the Balkans, not at least in

overcoming regional conflicts in the late 1990s. However, to date, the Western Balkans seem to be highly disappointed by what appears to be the lack of a well-defined European enlargement strategy, which is delaying the integration process and could result in countries such as Russia, China and Turkey exerting a growing influence over the region. According to Fassino, the admission process could be speeded up by the introduction of new economic policies as well as by stronger communication between the EU and the Western Balkans. “We want you to join the EU”: this is the clear statement that should be addressed to the Balkans.



Veran Matić and Igor Novaković

According to **Igor Novaković** (ISAC Fund and Council for Inclusive Governance, Serbia), the “politicization of the enlargement process” should also push the EU to engage more in the region, helping Balkan countries to overcome bilateral disputes. This would allow Western Balkans not only to overcome regional conflicts but also to create a positive narrative for the EU’s role in the region. Similarly, improved cooperation on counter-terrorism, migration and climate change will create a positive story about the EU in the Western Balkans. Moreover, engaging the Western Balkans in common consultation could be to the EU’s advantage. During the years 2015–2016, when the EU was tackling the peak of the migration issue, the role of the Western Balkans was crucial in containing the migration waves.

As stated by **Daliborka Uljarević** (Centre for Civic Education, Montenegro) and **Naim Rashiti** (Balkans Group, Kosovo), the EU should boost the process of institutional building and the rule of law, which are fundamental for the correct functioning of national democracies. Many people in the Balkans want EU membership in order for national institutions to become more democratically accessible. To achieve concrete results, the EU should be more active in solving crises (e.g. in Macedonia) and help the Western Balkans in those bilateral relations where the dialogue is “stuck” (e.g. between Serbia and Kosovo). Otherwise, as **Veran Matić** (B92, Serbia) asserted, other countries could take over the vacuum left by the EU, such as Russia, which is less passive than the EU and more active in protecting its interests in the region. For **Jean-Arnault Dérens** (Le Courrier des Balkans), the EU failed when it assumed that European hegemony would prevail over nationalisms. Many populist movements and voices are present in the Western Balkans’ political scenario, which is now living in a post-democratic phase. Similarly, as **Eleonora Poli** (IAI), maintained, what makes the accession process even more complex is the rise of euroscepticism in the Western Balkans and a failure to understand what the EU will look like in the near future. Against this backdrop, the Berlin Process has been fundamental not only for developing economic connectivity but also for revitalizing a debate on enlargement and the future of the EU.

Third Session: Sustaining Connectivity and Transformation in the Western Balkans

As **Tobias Flessenkemper** (CIFE) maintained, although enlargement is not likely to take place in the immediate future, initiatives promoted in the context of the Berlin Process can help to boost economic connectivity and sustain the transformation of the region, especially by fostering market integration and the rule of law. These conclusions were shared by **Ardian Hackaj** (ShtetiWeb, Albania). According to Hackaj, while the Berlin Process can only complement, rather



From left to right: Eleonora Poli, Jean-Arnault Dérens, Piero Fassino

than replace the EU enlargement process, it can certainly promote economic connectivity and the development of infrastructure and transport links, which would benefit the region and the EU as a whole, boosting economic convergence. However, to date the Berlin Process' biggest achievement has been the creation of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), which promotes open dialogue among youngsters on the future of the EU and the Western Balkans integration process. From another perspective, **Luisa Chiodi** (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, Italy) argued that the idea of a multispeed Europe should become a positive narrative to relaunch the EU and the Western Balkans accession process and not exclude aspiring member countries. Following this line of argument, **Spyros Economides** (London School of Economics) argued that economic connectivity and regional initiatives such as RYCO are certainly important; yet initiatives for promoting regional stability and security should not come before the implementation of the rule of law and democracy – if they do, enlargement will remain a utopia.

Gerald Knaus (European Stability Initiative, Germany) questioned the methodology of the accession process implemented by the EU, by taking as an example the failed attempts in Macedonia and Turkey. These countries, which have been negotiating the longest, are still far from becoming members of the EU. According to Knaus, to avoid the replication of similar situations in other countries, the European Commission should more closely monitor regional and country accession progress by producing technical assessments and fair statistical roadmaps. This would create a healthy spirit of competition among Western Balkans' countries and motivate them to overcome regional disputes.

Finally, **Milica Uvalić**, Professor of Economy at the University of Perugia, Italy, argued that the Berlin Process has also the merit of highlighting the existence of strong economic bilateral interests between the EU and the Western Balkans region. In this respect, the creation of a regional common market in the Balkans is

a fundamental step not only for overcoming regional economic fragmentation and the lack of economies of scale, but also for facilitating the enlargement process.

Conclusion

The conference ended with the closing remarks of two prominent speakers. **Michele Giacomelli**, Special Envoy for the Western Balkans Process Summit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, asserted that enlargement towards the Western Balkans is in the interests of the EU. The development of regional economic integration will attract foreign investments and prepare the region for access to the EU. Similarly, human connectivity and the youth dimension are fundamental for fostering a sense of European citizenship. Ambassador **Ferdinando Nelli Feroci**, IAI President, remarked that two main messages have emerged from the conference: the EU needs to show engagement, despite uncertainties within the enlargement process. In recent years, Croatia has joined the EU, economic agreements have been made with countries in the region and negotiations have been opened with Serbia and Montenegro. The EU is currently facing increasing insecurity, terrorism and anti-Europe movements. This has certainly not contributed to increased social support for the enlargement process. Moreover, regional bilateral issues, poor economic performances and the spread of nationalism is not favouring smooth accession processes. Yet the vacuum in the region needs to be filled by the EU to prevent other international actors, such as China and Russia, from taking advantage of it. Multispeed Europe, which is now a reality, may accommodate the needs of these countries and could be a methodology in itself for pursuing the process of integration.

Updated 24 May 2017

Conference Programme

Rome, 5 April 2017

Opening Session

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Elisabetta Belloni, Secretary General, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Nathalie Tocci, Deputy Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome

Keynote Speech

Vincenzo Amendola, Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

From Vienna to Paris and Trieste: The Berlin Process and the Civil Society Forum

Johannes Kyrle, Secretary General, Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (ÖFZ/CFA), Wien

Hedvig Morvai, Executive Director, European Fund for the Balkans, Belgrade

Allan Jones, Head of Unit for Strategy, Policy; EEA/EFTA, European Commission DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), Brussels

Session I

Integration, Differentiation and the Future of Europe

The past few years have witnessed an odd mix of integration, differentiation and disintegration in the EU. Integrationist progress, however incomplete, has been made on economic matters (e.g. the banking union), border management (e.g. the European border and coast guard agency) and foreign policy (the EU Global Strategy and its implementation). At the same time, the risk of disintegration looms large, with Brexit being the most notable case in point. Differentiated integration is partly a reality, yet one which is rarely discussed openly. What will the Union which the Western Balkans strive to join look like?

Chair **Florent Marciacq**, Research Director, Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (ÖFZ/CFA), Wien

Panelists **Stefan Lehne**, Carnegie Europe, Brussels
Aleksandar Petar Jovanovski, European Policy Institute (EPI), Skopje
Srdjan Cvijić, Open Society European Policy Institute, Brussels
Dušan Reljić, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin
Ivan Vejvoda, Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Wien

Session II

The Politicization of Enlargement

Enlargement had long been mostly a technocratic process, driven by EU elites with the permissive consent of their constituencies. The big bang enlargement and the enlargement fatigue that followed fundamentally changed this logic. EU enlargement policy has now become a highly political process, partly steered by individual governments, and increasingly susceptible to public opinion pressure. In the absence of a compelling narrative promoting the EU accession of Western Balkan states, the politicization of enlargement is mainly framed by Eurosceptic and anti-enlargement forces. Assuming that the politicization of enlargement will remain a fact of life, how to develop a positive enlargement narrative for the Western Balkans?

Chair **Piero Fassino**, President, Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI), Rome

Panelists **Igor Novaković**, ISAC Fund, Belgrade, and Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG), Glenside, PA

Daliborka Ujarević, Centre for Civic Education (CCE), Podgorica

Naim Rashiti, Balkans Group, Prishtina

Jean-Arnault Dérens, Le Courrier des Balkans (CdB), Arcueil

Eleonora Poli, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome

Veran Matić, B92, Belgrade

Session III

Sustaining Connectivity and Transformation in the Western Balkans

Because of the journey that both the EU and the Western Balkans have to make, enlargement is not likely to take place in the immediate future. Yet the carrot of accession has traditionally represented the most powerful anchor for the transformation of candidate countries. How can the reform momentum be maintained? What can be the role of specific initiatives to bolster the socio-economic resilience of the Western Balkans? Can initiatives promoted in the context of the Berlin process to boost economic connectivity sustain the transformation of the region, especially by fostering market integration and the rule of law? Connected to this, how can the EU and the Western Balkan countries contain or redirect the economic influence of other external players, which do not view the European future of the Balkans as the desirable direction of travel?

Chair **Tobias Flessenkemper**, Senior Research Associate, Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE), Nice

Panelists **Ardian Hackaj**, ShtetiWeb, Tirana

Luisa Chiodi, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, Rovereto

Spyros Economides, London School of Economics (LSE)

Gerald Knaus, European Stability Initiative (ESI), Berlin

Milica Uvalić, University of Perugia

Concluding Remarks

Michele Giacomelli, Special Envoy for the Western Balkan
Process Summit, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and
International Cooperation

Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, President, Istituto Affari Internazionali
(IAI), Rome

The Western Balkans in the European Union: Enlargement to What, Accession to What?

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affari Internazionali*), two series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Papers*) and other papers' series related to IAI research projects.

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