

From Thessaloniki to Sofia: Turning the Enlargement Process into a Win–Win Deal for All

by Ginevra Poli

ABSTRACT

During the conference “From Thessaloniki to Sofia and Beyond: Heading towards a Credible European Enlargement towards the Western Balkans?” (Rome, 6 June 2018), European experts analysed the current situation in the Western Balkans (WB6), namely Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and the North Macedonia, as well as the future of EU–WB6 relationship. The complex and multidimensional nature of the current global and European context makes cooperation between the two blocks a difficult endeavour. However, the region is already substantially integrated in the EU’s “orbit” with regard to many aspects of their mutual relationship – from trade relations to cultural ties. After a brief overview of the European Commission’s new strategy for the Western Balkans, the conference focused on the EU and WB6 national perspectives on the enlargement debate. The concluding section provided input on how to improve the EU–WB6 relationship, and on what measures should be implemented in order to make the enlargement process a win–win deal for all concerned parties.

European Union | EU enlargement | Western Balkans

keywords

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by Ginevra Poli*

Introduction

This report summarizes the proceedings of the conference “From Thessaloniki to Sofia and Beyond: Heading towards a Credible European Enlargement towards the Western Balkans?” hosted in Rome on 6 June 2018 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). The event was developed in cooperation with the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) and the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB). The discussion aimed at assessing the Commission’s new strategy for the Western Balkans,¹ with contributions from both European and regional experts. What the conference made clear was that, although the new strategy is a positive step forward, the process would be successful only if the two blocks work together in a reliable way. On the one hand, WB6 governments should implement the institutional reforms needed in the region. On the other hand, EU member states should take a more active role when it comes to boosting European initiatives in the region.

Ferdinando Nelli Feroci (IAI) opened the conference by welcoming participants and speakers. According to him, enlargement to the Western Balkans has proved to be particularly challenging for the European Union, as the effects of the multiple crises faced by the majority of EU member countries have been coupled with a changing international geopolitical stage. Yet, the Commission’s new strategy is a proof of a renewed European commitment to the Western Balkans, and it highlights the need to rethink the European project and the future of integration. Following

¹ European Commission, *A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans* (COM/2018/65), 6 February 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0065>.

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Nelli Feroci's introduction, **Myriam Ferran** (European Commission) emphasized the importance of the Western Balkans in the EU agenda. The EU–Western Balkans summit held in Sofia on 17 May 2018² was a sign that EU membership for the WB6 is a concrete possibility. Finally, **Hedvig Morvai** (European Fund for the Balkans) highlighted the fact that, despite ongoing issues in the region, for the WB6 the prospect of becoming members of the EU is stronger today than it was in the past. These countries have huge potential, and the EU could be the key to unlock and to transform the region. At the same time, the Western Balkans could be an asset for the Union, bringing new energy to the common project.



From left to right: Hedvig Morvai, Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, Myriam Ferran

Panel I – The Commission's strategy for the Western Balkans: moving towards a credible integration

Introduced by **Nathalie Tocci** (IAI), who stressed the strategic importance of the region and the necessity of a EU re-engagement in the area, the panel was opened by **Myriam Ferran** (European Commission). Ferran initiated the discussion by summarizing the European Union strategy for the Western Balkans, formed by 57 measures and six flagship initiatives. These initiatives will cover a wide range of actions, from financial investment to assistance on the content of reforms in the realms of the rule of law, security, connectivity, the digital agenda, bilateral reconciliations and the economy. However, Ferran made clear the fact that enlargement is a joint venture between the European Union and the WB6 countries. Although it is generally seen as a technical procedure, it is much more than that. First and foremost, it is a political process.

Countries that are willing to become EU members need to enforce their democratic standards according to those of the Union, as well as to respect fundamental rights. Against this backdrop, the countries' reports, published in April 2018 by the European Commission in the framework of its annual enlargement package,³ expressed the EU's political support for the WB6 but also highlighted, among many issues, the need for the WB6 to fight corruption, create an independent judiciary and reconcile bilateral disputes. In particular, with regard to the latter

² For more information, see the website of the Council of the European Union: <http://europa.eu/!qc69rk>.

³ European Commission, *Enlargement Package: Commission Publishes Reports on the Western Balkans Partners and Turkey*, 17 April 2018, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-3342_en.htm.

issue, communication, education in school and specific actions made by political elites are fundamental to overcoming current divisions as well as any legacy of the wars of the 1990s, which could rekindle nationalism.

Moreover, to fully integrate within the European market, the WB6 need to promote economic transparency, create new business and job opportunities and increase social equality. Hence, the creation of a Regional Economic Area (REA) is a fundamental tool to boost economic trends by stimulating interregional trade and overcoming any barrier. According to Ferran, the region has an historical opportunity to move forward, but the success of such an effort depends on WB6 countries' willingness to implement comprehensive reforms, as suggested by the new strategy. Beyond the enlargement process, the latter will result in long-term benefits that will have direct impact on the daily life of citizens.



From left to right: Armando Barucco, Srđan Majstorović, Nathalie Tocci

Armando Barucco (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation) highlighted the fact that Italy has welcomed the Commission's strategy and the prospect of European enlargement in the region. Even though a new government has been established in Italy, foreign policy will not face major changes vis-à-vis the area, and the Italian pro-enlargement stance will continue. However, Barucco highlighted two factors that have contributed to the rise of so-called "enlargement fatigue". On the one hand, the multiple crises that the EU has been facing have made member countries too focused on internal issues, with the attendant risk of transforming Europe into an exclusive "fortress". At the same time, as member states have different geopolitical priorities, effective cooperation is becoming difficult to reach.

On the other hand, the debate of "widening vs. deepening" is still relevant – and risks becoming a factor that might well negatively affect the enlargement process. As highlighted by the EU Global Strategy, the WB region is undoubtedly strategic. To avoid other migration crises in the near future, increasing cooperation in the security field should be a priority. At the same time, the region risks becoming the "playground" of other regional actors such as Russia, China and Turkey, all aiming to fill gaps left by the EU. Russia hopes to increase its influence in the area in order to undermine EU legitimacy. Turkey's role is more complicated to understand, and even though the country has a certain leverage, its domestic dynamics limit the range of its actions. China is showing increasing interest in the WB6 too. Thanks to huge investments, China is indeed influencing public procurement and increasing its economic presence there.

For **Srdan Majstorović** (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group) the credibility of EU commitment to the region was undermined by Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's 2014 declaration that no enlargement would be happening any time soon.⁴ That statement diminished the incentive for WB6 governments to implement reforms. The new strategy is certainly giving a new momentum to the process. Yet, in order to achieve these goals, both the European Commission and the member states should think about a more inclusive enlargement process. In some areas, this is already the case, as the region is part of several EU initiatives, such as the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). Moreover, with 75 per cent of global trade in the region being conducted with EU member countries, the Union is the main trade partner of WB6. Following this path, the EU should find other ways to include the WB6 countries in its policies, an approach that could also strengthen security cooperation in the area. From Majstorović's point of view, positive communication on the enlargement towards the WB6 is another area that should be carefully managed. Both WB6 governments and the EU should implement advocacy activities in order to achieve consensus on enlargement.



Myriam Ferran and Steven Blockmans

Majstorović advocated the WB6 countries should independently push forward on reforms rather than waiting for the input of EU requirements. Such a *modus operandi* should be implemented in particular with regard to the rule of law and the economy. Having clear economic plans would send a positive message to the EU and to investors, attracting more resources to the region. Since the consolidation of democracy is connected with the national economic situation, access to EU funds dedicated to structural development would help the WB6 economies and improve their political systems at the same time. The lack of a functioning economy affects the development of a proper middle class and encourages a "brain drain" which is currently under way in the region. Although investment in the digital agenda and in connectivity will undoubtedly bring positive results, social policies should also be at the centre of EU actions.

According to **Steven Blockmans** (Centre for European Policy Studies), there is a dichotomy between widening and deepening the European Union. The EU as a whole is constantly changing – currently, it is increasingly looking inwards and adapting to changes in its neighbourhood. Brexit, the relationship with Turkey and

⁴ Jean-Claude Juncker, *A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission*, 15 July 2014, <http://europa.eu/!CY63mV>.

the situation in Ukraine influence the Union's strategic "maps". Changes in the EU are not going to be fast, but its natural evolution will be one of widening and deepening at the same time.

Concerning the credibility of the strategy as such, Blockmans highlighted the fact that it is good to have a new strategy, one that is detached from Turkey's accession process and that focuses on the rule of law. Yet, setting a specific date for a particular country's accession can be detrimental to progress. If, as it is currently likely, no accession happens in 2025, there will be further loss to the EU's credibility.



Panel II: Tobias Flessenkemper, Stefan Lehne, Eleonora Poli, Michele Giacomelli, Marko Kmezić

Panel II – National perspectives on the Western Balkans: is there a politicization of the accession process?

The second panel, chaired by **Eleonora Poli** (IAI), aimed at providing an analysis of different national perspectives on the accession process. According to **Michele Giacomelli** (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation), the Sofia summit was both an ending and a new beginning. It was the end of a phase during which WB6 countries were not involved in EU summits on the region, and the beginning of a new momentum – one that aims at renewing the enlargement process, with new projects ranging from increasing the connectivity between the two regions to the implementation of environmental initiatives, to new funds for the Erasmus+ Programme. At the same time, and in line with the Trieste summit, held in July 2017, Sofia meeting placed emphasis on the creation of an economic area. Such a step would be pivotal for the region, not only in economic terms but also as a proof of WB6 countries' ability to cooperate among themselves. Enlargement is, in fact, a double-headed project. On the one hand, the Western Balkans should converge towards the EU's economy, values and visions – especially on the civil-society level. On the other hand, the EU should make clear that its commitment is serious, and that membership for the WB6 countries is, indeed, "on the horizon".

Marko Kmezić (Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group) argued that the promotion of "stabilocracy" in the region by the EU actually contrasts with the Commission's strategy. The region is not, in fact, progressing along the path of democratic stabilization. On the contrary, there are four regional obstacles to Europeanization: weak and contested statehood, institutional weakness and ineffective rule of law, competitive authoritarianism, and uncertainty within the EU and the region itself. Moreover, since civil society is the key to reforming these countries, the EU should empower social actors in order to promote bottom-up initiatives to boost democracy.

According to **Tobias Flessenkemper** (Centre international de formation européenne), despite all the difficulties there is an EU consensus that enlargement towards Western Balkans should happen. To date, the WB6 are far more integrated into “Europe” than one would think, and the results obtained in the last 20 years are not as unsatisfactory as they might seem. During this period, many initiatives to promote state building were launched – even



Tobias Flessenkemper and Stefan Lehne

during the 2004 enlargement process, when EU energies were focused instead on the Central and Eastern European countries. Notwithstanding these positive notes, however, there are political fault lines that have still to be addressed.

EU member states are developing different views on enlargement. For France, enlargement has not been a priority for many years, and today the country has more urgent problems to address, such as the migration crisis. France also is less economically integrated with the WB6 than Germany, whose economy is already tied to the region and needs workers from there. However, from a geopolitical perspective, Brexit, Russia and a changed relationship with the US have left Germany in a precarious position. Over the next few years, Germany’s role will weaken: Berlin will be torn between defending and consolidating the EU – including its enlargement – and simultaneously managing other challenges and its own domestic dynamics.

Stephan Lehne (Carnegie Europe) argued that enlargement has always been a political process. However, looking at the four big member states – France, Germany, the UK and Italy – and their stances during the 2004 enlargement process, three (Germany, Italy and the UK) were strongly committed while France was reluctant. Today, the UK is leaving and France is more sceptical than before. Italy’s new government’s position is not clear yet. Germany remains quite open, but its domestic scene is different from in the past and there is an element of hesitation. The attitude of other member states that are closer to WB6, such as Slovenia and Croatia, is also problematic: they have strong economic interests in supporting WB enlargement, but at the same time bilateral issues exist between them and WB6 countries.

Before 2004, being pro-EU meant also being in favour of enlargement and of the unification of Europe. However, this is no longer the case. Today, the pro-EU front is against enlargement and rather in favour of consolidating the EU first. Yet, there is no alternative to enlargement for both the WB and the EU. Without accession, the region will become more and more destabilized, migration from these countries will increase and there will be economic losses. The situation is one of stalemate, a sort of political “lock in”: even if there is no strong support for enlargement, EU

engagement with the region cannot be withdrawn.

Panel III – Revamping democracy against institutional fragility: a WB6 assessment

The third and final panel focused on the current situation in the Western Balkans. In the introduction, **Igor Bandović** (European Fund for the Balkans) gave a summary of the core regional issues. Discussing democracy and state fragility is indeed not possible without taking into consideration regional dynamics and countries' specificities.



From left to right: Ardian Hackaj, Adnan Ćerimagić, Igor Bandović

Ardian Hackaj (Cooperation and Development Institute), gave a glimpse of Albania's current situation. From his point of view, the country's democracy is still fragile. Its civil society needs to play a greater role in the enlargement process, which, according to Hackaj, is inevitable. At the same time, EU actions have to be more effective, highlighting their real impact. For instance, while the Union has been investing in Albania a great deal, Chinese investments, which are smaller than European ones, seem to have had a larger impact as they are communicated better, are visible "on the ground" and have direct effects on the citizens. At the same time, while the EU is setting rules to create a market economy with the Copenhagen criteria, China is taking advantage of such results.

When it comes to enlargement, **Jovana Marović** (Politikon Network) identified three causes for the lack of substantial progress. First, ruling political elites of the WB6 do not want to change the status quo at the risk of losing their own privileges and power. Second, the EU is not yet ready or strong enough for enlargement to happen. Third, some member states are not supportive of enlargement. In the case of Montenegro, the country has weak and deeply politicized institutions. There is also a lack of transparency and accountability, with frequent and often unpunished violations of law. For instance, 50 per cent of the court records on corruption are rejected or sanctioned below the legal minimum; 57 per cent of citizens do not believe in the effectiveness of the country's agencies set up to act against corruption, and 50 per cent do not believe in the impartiality of the judicial system. The economic situation is in no better shape: public debt stands at 70 per cent of the country's gross domestic product and there is a high level of unemployment – especially among the younger generations.

Adnan Ćerimagić (European Stability Initiative) highlighted the fact that in Bosnia and Herzegovina institutions are also corrupted and deeply politicized.

The international community – in particular the EU – should do something, even at the cost of admitting that everything that has been tried in the country thus far has failed and that there has been almost no progress. At the same time, the EU should be an example to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to the other WB6. Bosnia and Herzegovina's report, issued in April by the Commission in the context of its enlargement package,⁵ indicates that freedom of expression and the independence of the media – both held to be deficient in the country – are fundamental indicators of democracy. Yet, some EU member countries, Hungary and Poland for example, are currently not championing such principles.



From left to right: Adnan Ćerimagić, Igor Bandović, Jovana Marović, Arbëresha Loxha

Arbëresha Loxha (EBRD consultant) highlighted how Kosovo's political landscape is fragmented and highly polarized. Some progress has been made in reforming its public administration and judicial system, and in fighting corruption. Yet, all these reforms are in their early stages, while progress is too slow. With regard to the economy, the situation is similar. Although Kosovo is a signatory to the SAA, and it has signed and enforced many agreements for liberalizing its market in order to become an acceptable candidate country, it still requires a wide range of reforms as well as a normalized relationship with Serbia. In Loxha's opinion, the new strategy is good as it underlines how a comprehensive and legally binding agreement between Belgrade and Pristina is crucial for the enlargement process.

Closing remarks

Beatrice Covassi (European Commission) and **Nathalie Tocci** (IAI) made the final remarks. Tocci stressed the fact that, in order to be successful, the enlargement process needs greater political involvement from EU member states and a renewed political commitment by the WB6 countries to put in place the reforms needed. Covassi highlighted the efforts that the Commission, together with the EU External Action Service, is making to reconnect citizens with the idea of enlargement. Even though the current political situation is a difficult one – with growing nationalism and euroscepticism as well as with European Parliament elections due in 2019 – it is time for the EU to re-engage with the Western Balkans.

⁵ European Commission, *Key findings of the 2018 Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina*, 17 April 2018, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-3408_en.htm.

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Both speakers agreed that the Union's role is pivotal with respect to structural reforms, but when it comes to reconciling bilateral disputes the EU can help only up to a certain extent. WB6 governments themselves have the main responsibility to overcome regional disputes and issues. Addressing the new strategy, Covassi concluded her intervention by highlighting the fact that, unlike in the case of previous enlargements, the complexity of the Western Balkans renders a one-size-fits-all approach unfeasible. Although the process is complex, and it will take some time, it was important to give a concrete time horizon – both for the WB countries and the EU. For the former, having a specific date would help in implementing reforms; for the latter, it would keep the process on the agenda. WB enlargement could indeed help the European integration project. First, the enthusiasm of the Balkans' younger generations could revive their EU counterparts and bring a new perspective into the Union. Second, it could help in reconsidering some basic rules with regard to solidarity and cohesion in a much wider sense.



Nathalie Tocci and Beatrice Covassi

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Conference Programme

Rome, 6 June 2018

Opening Session

Welcome Remarks

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

Myriam Ferran, Director for Strategy and Turkey, European Commission DG NEAR

Hedvig Morvai, Executive Director, European Fund for the Balkans (EFB)

Panel I

The Commission's Strategy for the Western Balkans: moving towards a credible integration

Chair **Nathalie Tocci**, Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Speakers **Myriam Ferran**, Director for Strategy and Turkey, European Commission DG NEAR

Srdan Majstorović, Chairman of the Governing Board, European Policy Centre (CEP); Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)

Armando Barucco, Director of the Policy Planning Unit, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Steven Blockmans, Senior Research Fellow and Head of EU Foreign Policy Unit, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

Panel II

National perspectives on the Western Balkans: is there a politicization of the accession process?

Chair **Eleonora Poli**, Researcher, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Speakers **Michele Giacomelli**, Special Envoy for the Western Balkans Process, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Marko Kmezić, Assistant Professor at the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz; Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG)

Tobias Flessenkemper, Senior Fellow and European Policy Project Director, Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE)

Stefan Lehne, Visiting Scholar, Carnegie Europe

Panel III

Democracy and state fragility in the WB6

- Chair **Igor Bandović**, Senior Programme Manager, European Fund for the Balkans (EFB)
- Speakers **Ardian Hackaj**, Research Director, Cooperation and Development Institute (CDI)
- Adnan Ćerimagić**, European Stability Initiative (ESI)
- Jovana Marović**, Executive Director, Politikon Network
- Arbëresha Loxha**, Consultant, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)

Concluding Remarks

- Nathalie Tocci**, Director, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
- Beatrice Covassi**, Head of the European Commission's Representation in Italy

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