

The Theory of Change: What Method Can Bring the Western Balkans into the EU?

InCLUDE, a podcast of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI),
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Welcome to InCLUDE, a podcast of the Institute for International Affairs in Rome, supported by the Open Society Foundations Western Balkans. We want to discuss today the options of how to integrate the countries of the Western Balkans as full members into the European Union. The guests in this episode are **Lura Limani**, the team leader in the Open Society Foundations Western Balkans, and **Matteo Bonomi**, who is Senior Fellow at the Institute for International Affairs in Rome. My name is **Dušan Reljić**, and I'm a European affairs advisor in Brussels.

Lura, introduce us first a little bit to your organization. I presume that some of our viewers and listeners are familiar with the Open Society Foundations, founded by George Soros, the US based philanthropist, but the Western Balkans branch is relatively new, right?

Lura:

First of all, Dušan, thank you so much for having me. Open Society Foundations is a staple name in the region as elsewhere. As Open Society Foundations we have been in the region at least since the early nineties, but you're completely correct: the Open Society Foundations Western Balkans is a new outfit. Since 2023 we now operate as a regional entity with a more streamlined and focused strategy for all the six countries of the region and we work on two big priorities. We primarily work on EU integration and regional cooperation work, that I lead, and the Twin Transition. In terms of the programme that I lead, we're working on integration so that it actually domestic reforms or reforms at home in the region, reflect EU priorities: energy security, competitiveness, EU needs for internal reforms to actually be able to accept more members. So, it's a dynamic work and what's actually very different and new.

I would say, is that we don't work only in the region, we also work in particular EU member states and in Brussels because, frankly, a lot of decisions about the region are made elsewhere and often without the actual input from the region. So, this is our primary goal, to actually bring civil society, experts, local communities voices into debates and into places where decisions about their lives are being made.

Dušan:

Lura, the Open Society Foundations are funding InCLUDE, the program we are introducing today. Tell us, please, what is, as the sociologists would say, your theory of

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change: what do you want to achieve?

Lura:

For us, for the entire program in our work, the theory of change is quite simple: if there is an actual political momentum in the EU for enlargement, and that momentum is met with the appropriate reforms in the region, enlargement actually works. For us, real progress is only when a couple of things are happening simultaneously, and we're witnessing this EU political momentum and political commitment not just as rhetoric but actually in consistent policies, in financial commitments as well, which as you know is very important this year.

We also see that in the region the reforms are actually changing institutions, are actually improving citizens' lives, and there is a bigger connection between the EU and the region, in the sense that enlargement or accession is really a dynamic process and it's shaped both in the candidate countries and in the EU member states, and I think a deeper or at least a more intensive dialogue between member states and candidate countries need to happen. This is also the reason why we're partnering with one of the top think tanks in Rome: The Institute for International Affairs (IAI) is working on InCLUDE, which is going to be a three-year initiative.

Our primary focus here is that we're hoping the work that is done through this project will actually help candidate countries to take decisive steps towards membership, and at the same time reframe the enlargement debates internally in EU member states: in Rome of course, but also in other member states and in Brussels, and influence the priorities of the Italian Council of the EU presidency that is going to take place in 2028.

Dušan:

Matteo, you are in charge of the InCLUDE initiative at the Italian Institute for International Affairs: what makes your project different from the many other similar activities that we have seen in the past years?

Matteo:

Thank you, Dušan. What makes InCLUDE different is probably the fact that it starts from the demystification of the enlargement debate.

For many years enlargement was presented as a stalled process, held back by technical and bureaucratic complexity, institutional fragility within candidate countries, and in the continuous need of new initiatives, new methodological framework and so on. What is actually striking is that when the enlargement momentum, at least to a certain extent returned after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, some countries have been able to advance quite quickly. This showed that many of the obstacles to enlargement were not technical but rather political. It raises the fundamental question of whether we need to reinvent the enlargement wheel, or we should simply make it turn again with the proper political will. This is exactly where the InCLUDE project comes in to work in three main dimensions:

First all of all, it wants to help, simplify and streamline the enlargement process, in order to get it realistic and credible again.

Secondly, it works on bilateral and multilateral dimension of the enlargement process, looking at enlargement friends and foes, and it will try to make enlargement friends friendlier and to provide more support to enlargement countries to fulfil the objective of accession, but also try to detach bilateral disputes and other possible vetoes from the enlargement processes that are not based on EU wide reasons.

Thirdly, it'll try to connect and to strengthen the nexus between enlargement and other EU priorities, starting from security as we did two weeks ago at the Munich Security Conference, but also with EU competitiveness, energy and the broader debate about EU institutional reforms and the new EU budget.

And as a fourth transversal dimension, of course, as we are an Italian think tank based in Rome, we look in particular at the Italian perspective and Italian approach towards the region, but also its role in supporting enlargement in Europe. This will be very crucial because in 2028 Italy will hold the presidency of the EU Council, and this could come at a really critical moment for the enlargement to see if current aspirations, especially of Montenegro and Albania, could transform in accession or not.

Dušan:

Matteo, you want to grease the wheels, this is my impression. But I happen to know that you're also a sea captain, that you have a skipper's certificate. So, you have experience with headwinds, particularly in the Adriatic Sea: they are currently strong headwinds against full membership of the Western Balkan states in the European Union.

You have pundits talking about membership light, you have member states discussing two or even three tiers of membership. What can your project, what can InCLUDE, achieve against such strong headwinds?

Matteo:

As anyone who sails on in the Adriatic, I know very well the "bura", as they say in Croatia, or "bora" as they call it in Trieste, this cold, strong wind coming from the north and pushing southeast.

Today there is a strong bura against enlargement, but also against European integration more in general I would say. Every time that European project is under pressure, is under shock, under a new crisis, there is always the temptation to divide between a core Europe and the rest.

You have multi-speed, multi-tier Europe, because there is the illusion that without those peripheric countries the core could do much, much better. I think it's not really like that and often when dealing with crisis the lack of consensus was within the core of the European Union on the way how to proceed.

So, I would say that differentiated integration is not a magic solution for EU project, it's not in general but it's not in enlargement, in particular. Over the last few years, we have seen re-emerging the idea of strengthening gradual integration for the enlargement countries, especially to try to manage between the geopolitical urgency of act quick, fast, and the necessity to maintain a merit-based approach. So, there was this looking for some magic solution that could get the best of the two worlds. The truth is, I believe, enlargement policy, at least since the nineties, has been combining strongly these two elements: graduality and conditionality. What I think the project, the initiative InCLUDE, can contribute in this, is help to articulate different kinds of graduality in different contexts. So, help to calibrate in the Balkans with also different candidate countries, but also towards maybe the "Associated Trio" to help to maintain this approach to graduality, to make sure that it maintains a direct connection with accession. Because otherwise the risk is that this instrument, instead of becoming an instrument helping the integration of new countries in the EU, becomes instrument of their permanent exclusion.

Dušan:

Matteo, what is if the bura turns into a tempest? What is it if, within a couple of years, we have in several EU member states hard right-wing governments, for instance, in France and in Germany?

But before you respond to this question, I would like to ask Lura to tell us what can be done to speed up the integration, the full integration, of the Western Balkans countries into the EU in within the next three years.

Lura:

Just to add to what Matteo was saying, we've witnessed extreme acceleration of the progress when there is political will. I think the key should be, and this is where InCLUDE absolutely contributes, that we need to definitely frame the EU enlargement as geostrategic for the EU itself, not as a charity case. This definitely is a message that echoes in certain EU policy circles.

We have seen the Commission President herself actually frame it this way, but this also has to be translated into national debates within the EU member states. I think this is where the message is often less heard. So, a lot of the things that can be done right now is about EU being consistent and a credible partner because we still want to see a process that is meritocratic, which will then absolutely demand painful reforms from the region.

But this cannot be done if the political signalling is not clear, if it's not consistent. EU reforms should happen simultaneously. We cannot use basically absorption capacity and all the discussions that Matteo just mentioned: arguments about differentiated accession as an excuse to paralyze the process. From the region's side, I think it's clear that the region has to take this momentum really seriously.

They have to accelerate reforms; they actually have to show that a real change is happening on the ground. Not use the process as a local domestically expedient

narrative, without when they're actually resisting real rule of law reforms. One thing is for sure: any democratic backsliding in the region itself is a God sent argument to any anti-enlargement political force in Paris, in Berlin, or anywhere else in Europe.

Now, I agree with Matteo that we do need a credible case, that we do need to see a country completing negotiations in the next few years for enlargement to actually feel and be real. Another test, like the proof is in the pudding, will be the next MFF, the Multiannual Financial Framework, and this is something that is going to be determined this year. So, this is something that we can do now, before the elections in France, before some of the state elections, even later this year. The next MFF needs to actually show the financial commitment for enlargement, either at the moment there is no explicit budgetary envelope for enlargement countries or the Balkans, but there are two ways you can do that.

One is by having an explicit budget. Second is by showing support for an increased pre-accession instrument, so the instrument for pre-accession EPA IV needs to be larger than the EPA III. I think these are clear and practical ways the EU can show that enlargement is still on the table.

Dušan:

Thank you. We are approaching the end and I'd like to go back now to the tempest issue: if, within a couple of years, we have hard right-wing governments in a couple of EU member states, but foremost in France and in Germany, Matteo, is it realistic to think about any new EU enlargement?

Matteo:

I mean, in Italy we have quite a tempest in the last few years.

We had first a government formed by Five Stars Movement and Northern League, a few years ago. Now we have hard-right components in the current government and we have seen how much to certain extent, especially after Brexit, many of these extremes can be somehow absorbed, at least at the European level, once they came into power. Of course, we never saw something of this scale happening neither in France nor in Germany and this would be certainly a crucial test, not only for enlargement but for the European Union itself.

Dušan:

I want to thank our guests, **Lura Limani**, from the Open Society Foundations Western Balkans and **Matteo Bonomi**, from the Italian Institute for International Affairs.

Thank you for watching this episode of InCLUDE, the podcast of the two organizations, I hope to see you soon again.