The Theory of Change: Before the EU's Door – Will Anyone Walk Through?

InCLUDE, a podcast of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI),
supported by the Open Society Foundations Western Balkans*
Episode No. 4 (1 November 2026)

Welcome to InClude, a podcast of the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome, supported by the Open Society Foundations Western Balkans. We want to drive forward the discussion about how to integrate the Western Balkans countries as full members of the European Union.

I'm your host, and my name is **Dušan Reljić**.

Franz Kafka's writing was often about illogical bureaucracy and the helplessness before opaque systems of power. Kafka wrote, among other masterworks, a story called "Before the Law". In it, a man comes to a door and asks to be let in. The doorkeeper says: not now, perhaps later. The door stands open, yet the man sits down and waits. Days turn into years. Shortly before the man dies, he asked why, in all these years, nobody else had come to the door. And the doorkeeper replies: this entrance was meant only for you. And now I'm going to shut it.

Since 13 years, no new country has joined the European Union. Yet, Montenegro could sign its succession treaty next year. Will Montenegro's potential entry restore trust into the EU in the region? Or will it leave others waiting outside, much like in Kafka's story?

We'll examine the changing political framework for further EU enlargement with **Matteo Bonomi**, the Head of the Europe programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome. And **Stefan Ristovski**, researcher at the European Policy Institute in Skopje, North Macedonia. They will help us understand how the next EU budget will change when it comes to funds for potential member states.

Matteo, in your most recent analysis, you emphasise that the central challenge facing EU enlargement now is not institutional – it is not about inventing new enlargement wheels – but political, why?

Matteo:
Because I think that this proliferation of new models, new non-papers, with new ideas for enlargement risks at this point to become an alibi for the lack of political will.

What is fundamental for this phase of enlargement, especially for the front runners, is to rebuild complete political trust in the process. You will do the last step we require you

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to do and then you will manage to keep its worth and open the door for new members.

And this is basically political. And if there is no basic trust in the political process, there is no gradual, associated or any new kind of membership that can compensate for this.

Dušan:
But next year we have election-time in Europe: four of the five biggest EU member states by population will go to the ballot box, and four smaller ones as well.

The French should get a new president, citizens in five German federal units will cast their votes in elections. All over the place, far-right parties are steadily gaining ground. They exploit fears about new members, money and migration. Isn't it naive to expect governments to take political risks on enlargement in such times?

Matteo:
I don't think it's naive, but of course you're right. The European Union is experiencing an extremely delicate moment. I think we must notice, 10 years after Brexit, how the nature of eurosceptic and far-right parties in the European Union have changed a lot in the meantime.

They do not want necessarily to exit the Union as the UK did but they have a much more pragmatic approach. They want to change the European Union from within as, I think, Italy exemplifies quite well. If this will be the case for all incoming forces in the next year, of course, nobody knows. But I think nobody wants to be in the situation of the UK, even bigger countries than Italy, like France or Germany. So, I would say, we should be careful and balance our expectations. At the same time, enlargement is a very peculiar policy, and we have seen many sovereignist right-wing political parties that for different reasons at the end were supportive of enlargement.

We look at Orbán's policy towards the Western Balkans, for instance. So as far as enlargement is not perceived as a deepening of the Union but as a widening, I think there could be some space also for sovereignists' appropriation of this policy. And sometimes, paradoxically, the political mainstream is more concerned and can be extremely destructive towards the enlargement policy in order not to provide grounds to sovereignists forces.

Emmanuel Macron's "No" to North Macedonia, a few years ago, it's a perfect example. I think now the political objective, especially for Montenegro, should be the one to close the accession negotiations, and they're very close to it, and sign an accession treaty by mid or the end of 2027.

And then the ball will be in the member states' court, but it will be an open match. The door will be open, but we'll see who will enter.

Dušan:
All member states must ratify their accession treaties and in some of the member states,

such as France and the Netherlands, the national procedures are particularly demanding.

Will Montenegro make it through Kafka's door? And what will happen if the ratification fails in one or more member states?

Matteo:
Of course, this is a difficult question that nobody can really answer. But I think, as I was saying, that what Montenegro can do is its best to be ready and to put pressure on these countries to ratify.

What we can also do is to think about the technical measures to allow Montenegro, as a country that signs an accession treaty, to participate as much as it can in the EU budget, EU policy and EU institutions, as a temporary measure. And this could be done maybe also to release of some pressure on the member states and provide them also maybe with a bigger window of time to be able to implement. Far-right far-left, centrists: political positions do not translate automatically in a position on enlargement. I think the political door will be open and we will see. But I think we are closer to enlargement than ever in the last 13 years, and I think it's a window of opportunity that should be used proactively, despite all the difficulties that you rightly highlighted.

Dušan:
There are examples, for instance before Romania and Bulgaria entered the European Union, they had already received significant money from the EU budget. This brings me to the part of the discussion with Stefan.

My pressing suggestion to everyone dealing with EU enlargement is to read the paper which Stefan recently wrote. It is also in the framework of InCLUDE, and our podcast is part of it.

I'll tell you: no other one goes so deep into the labyrinth of the next EU budget. Stefan explores the far-away corners where the money to support EU enlargement is hidden. But in previous EU budgets, Stefan, the so-called Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, the money for the aspiring countries, was not hidden – it was clearly marked: what happened now?

Stefan:
Thank you Dušan for the invitation, thank you for the acknowledgement of my work. Even though I worked on this paper over summer I think the topic is most relevant now, with the negotiations for the next EU budgets heating up in the Council of the EU. It's fair to point out that the EU, with this new seven-year budget, is undergoing an exercise to streamline, harmonise its own budget general.

A lot of its funding programmes, policies, are now being blended. The previous enlargement was financed by at least three different separate instruments. In the past three budget rounds there has been only one, as you name it, the Instrument for Pre-

accession Assistance.

But for this 25 years pre-accession has always been a separate instrument with its own rules on objectives and its own budget. And now the EU is breaking part with this process and is putting together the support for the candidates in the same instrument, as all the countries in its neighbourhood and around the world.

I think it's fair to point out that this new instrument is designed across different geographical pillars. In the Europe pillar sits the support for pre-accession assistance. The regulation strictly clarifies that there will be an allocated budget, at a given point in the future, for the enlargement countries.

It specifies that additional rules for implementation of this instrument will be delivered. So, while the EU is streamlining its budget, it certainly recognises the need that the support that goes for the candidates is a bit different than any other third country that EU provides funding.

Dušan:
Stefan, pardon me, to me it looks like a lot of new bureaucratic fog. Previously we knew that there was 14 billion euro for EU enlargement, for the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, now we don't know the amount of money. What's the implication of this new fog, also politically?

Stefan:
I think that this transformation is a different journey for the EU but even more for the candidate countries and the potential candidates which can benefit from this.

I agree that the main implication, as I will try to summarise, is uncertainty or a need for clarity. The first one is how much money of this will be allocated for enlargement. We do really have to take into account that the portfolio of candidate countries has changed in the past seven years. We were on the brink to see even Iceland joining the group of countries that might join the EU. Obviously, these countries have different needs because of the different background of the enlargement process, the different things that are going on in different parts of Europe.

This is something that is not very clear how it will be used, there is no strict for rule that will be used.

Dušan:
But in your paper, you say that there are estimates that at least 20 billion euros will be needed for the Western Balkans to catch up with the EU average. In the past, throughout all the three previous Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, not even a semblance of such a sum was ever seen.

In your opinion, what would it take for the next EU budget to make a real difference for the Western Balkans? Perhaps your answer in Euros.

Stefan:
I was recently approached by a journalist who asked me a tricky question, and it was: is the Western Balkans short of money or capacity to spend it?

I think that your line of inquiry, or at least my reply, will go along these lines. I think that the significant increase of EU budget flows apart from participation in the single market has been proven as the key driver for economic growth and support for socioeconomic transformation of the candidates.

We have to acknowledge that the absorption capacity of the candidate countries, particularly the Western Balkans, has been challenged. I think that my answer will go in two directions. A: obviously more funding. If we see that the countries are there in the waiting room for more than 13 years, they have missed the opportunity to benefit at least 11 times more as member states that are from the region and joined the EU, like Bulgaria. Certainly, there is a need for increase of this funding. And B: to address this capacity deficit. I think that a very large chunk of the EU funds isbeing delegated and implemented through international consortiums, centralised financial platforms where the domestic ministries are given much less of this available funds.

Besides being a lesson of learning by doing, I think that increasing the funds available will make at least the message that it's too big to fail. We can try to squeeze in these two issues together.

Dušan:
Thanks. There was a very popular tune called "Money makes the world go round". We will have a look at it whether it's also true in this case. But Matteo, turning to your recent paper again, you write that the EU has to recalibrate the relationship between integration and accession. What is your concrete proposal?

Matteo:
Over the years, the EU has extremely potentiated the pre-accession part of the enlargement policy and this has been very effective during the 'Big Bang' enlargement towards Central and Southeastern Europe. This has become clearly dysfunctional for the Western Balkans. I Now, I think we should, first of all, signal that accession is possible.

We need countries that show that it is possible to pass through this door. At the same time the EU should be sure that this does not create the impression of a new pause of enlargement policy as it happened with Croatia a long time ago. It should really bring Montenegro in, but at the same time provide a common horizon for the entire region.

For this, I think, a recalibration with more money for the pre-accession instrument will be fundamental because we know that even if some country managed to enter the EU in a couple of years, the others will take much longer period, and we cannot afford to lose another generation in the Balkans.

Dušan:
Matteo Bonomi and Stefan Ristovski, thank you for this discussion.
If I may say: the discussion was concrete – and not Kafkaesque.

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Hope to see you soon again.