Report

PROSPECTS FOR THE EU ENLARGEMENT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY OR A STRATEGIC TURNING POINT?

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Report on Enlargement to Western Balkans Roundtable

*On **October 1st**, the **Brussels Office of the EUROPEUM Institute, representing the Visegrad Platform**, kicked off the month with an expert roundtable discussion titled **'Prospects for the EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans: A Missed Opportunity or a Strategic Turning Point?'** The event aimed to explore successes, failures, and future prospects for enlargement into the Western Balkans while fostering dialogue among experts in the field.*

Discussion

Introducing the central focus of the discussion on the geopolitical realities of the Western Balkans and its context, the moderator proposed dividing the discussion into three main parts, which were then loosely followed. First, the successes, challenges, and future avenues for the enlargement. Second, the role that the CEE countries can play in the enlargement negotiations, and third, the changing realities in both candidate and member states.

The EU must better communicate the benefits of integration to ordinary citizens, not just to political elites, in candidate and member countries

The topic of enlargement, closely connected to security in the EU neighborhood, became a priority again after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, as one of the panelists highlighted, the focus has shifted away from the Western Balkans towards Ukraine and Moldova. Since the start of the Trump administration, enlargement has been overshadowed altogether by other pressing topics. The debate then continued with the panelists giving introductory insights into the enlargement debate. In their initial answers, all panelists highlighted in particular the need for clearer strategic communication from the EU towards citizens in both the EU and the candidate countries, a point repeated throughout the discussion. Accession must be communicated as beneficial for society as a whole, not just as a political goal of the elite. Another recurring theme mentioned by both panelists and experts was the need to capitalize on the momentum of enlargement and continue making progress in the accession negotiations.

Stalled progress undermines the position of the EU in the region and as a geopolitical actor

Furthermore, many participants emphasized that EU influence and leverage in the region have weakened significantly, especially in resolving political disputes and addressing geopolitical security concerns. Citizens in the region, who began their accession efforts as early as the 2000s, now face growing disillusionment with promises that seem endlessly delayed. The Western Balkans are considered natural partners in security and defense, and gradual integration in these areas could bring tangible benefits even before full accession. However, experts warned of credibility gaps. Prolonged indecision risks leaving space for external actors, including Russia, Turkey, China, and the Gulf states, whose economic investments and increasing influence challenge EU norms and strategic authority in the region. Meanwhile, instead of strengthening its position and demonstrating leadership, the EU appears fragmented. Inconsistent messaging from Brussels and national capitals undermines trust. For example, while Albania and Montenegro have made progress in negotiations, ratification hurdles in France and skepticism in Austria could delay accession despite technical advances. The deadlock in accession talks caused by one or a few

member states could be addressed by abandoning unanimity in the accession negotiations. However, moving to QMV would, of course, require a unanimous decision.

One of the experts attending the debate weighed in further on the EU's role in the region, noting that both Albania and Montenegro (the current accession frontrunners) are seen as potential examples that could encourage others, such as North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, to advance. Although the EU's credibility in the region has suffered, most populations remain pro-accession and want to join the EU because integration is viewed as a driver of development. However, due to the lack of momentum, not only is the EU's economic influence waning as other geopolitical players invest in the region, but also its political reputation as a norm-creator and upholder has suffered from its inability to mitigate political tensions. The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia remains stagnant, while Bosnia and Herzegovina struggles with internal dysfunction and secessionist tendencies, and democratic reforms in the region are slowing.

Far-right parties in the EU focus too much on the risks of enlargement, while the risks of non-enlargement are sidelined

Afterwards, one of the debating experts raised again the issue of opposition to the accession of new countries within the EU itself, linking it to growing political polarization. The increased political power of far-right parties is, according to them, one of the main reasons for the stalled enlargement. While technical progress in the accession talks continues, many member states would be reluctant to ratify the accession of new countries. They argued that the main issue lies in the perception among the population that enlargement has not brought them tangible benefits. The only path forward, the expert claimed, is to convince the populations of France, Germany, Italy, and the rest of the member states that enlargement is beneficial for them and for Europe's future. Such messaging, coupled with strong leadership and a renewed vision for European integration and enlargement, could still bridge the emerging divide.

Closer cooperation and maintaining momentum are crucial to preserving EU influence in its neighborhood

The discussion underlined that the Western Balkans' path to the EU is at a crossroads. On one side, committed candidates like Albania and Montenegro show that progress is possible. On the other, unresolved disputes, weakened EU leverage, and internal divisions within the Union raise doubts about the credibility of the process. The EU should not overlook the possibilities of 'integration before accession,' through closer involvement and gradual inclusion before full membership is possible. This hybrid model, if designed credibly, could sustain reform momentum and prevent disillusionment.

Enlargement is no longer just a question of technical readiness, but it is a geopolitical necessity. To succeed, the EU must combine reform conditionality with credible integration steps, communicate

benefits more effectively, and demonstrate political will at the highest level. Without this, the EU risks losing not only the Western Balkans but also its own transformative power.