

The Western Balkans in the EU's Next Geopolitical Cycle: Implications for policy and reform prospects

Outcomes of the EUI High-Level policy dialogue, organised in Podgorica, Montenegro, on 15 October 2024.

Introduction. A new political cycle in the European Union (EU) started in Fall 2024. Markedly different in form and substance from the previous five years, EU institutions, Member States, and candidate countries in the Western Balkans and beyond grapple with a political, economic, and security environment deeply unsettled by the war in Ukraine. These developments have led to a renewed impetus for EU foreign and security policies, particularly for enlargement. Long regarded as the Union's most successful external policy, the prospect of future accession has been mired in internal navel-gazing about the EU's absorption capacity and enduring roadblocks, from domestic reforms to regional reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has deeply influenced the attitude of the EU and its Member States towards enlargement. The urgency to accelerate the accession path of Ukraine, together with Moldova and potentially Georgia, coupled with the French initiative for a European Political Community, has raised concerns in the "old" candidate countries that their accession process would lose momentum. Against this background, the EU and its Member States are pushing for concrete proposals and plans — above all, the Growth Plan — to chart pathways for completing the next round of accession. This High-Level Policy Dialogue unpacked the key issues in the EU's political and security agenda in the next cycle, with the objective of creating a platform and a community of practices that can facilitate the path of the Western Balkans into the European Union.

The European University Institute (EUI), with the generous and ongoing support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, organised and facilitated a timely exchange between Western Balkan and EU officials. The dialogue was attended by high-level policymakers from the host country of Montenegro, including the Deputy Prime Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Mr Filip Ivanović, Chief Negotiator of Montenegro with the EU, Mr Predrag Zenović, as well as from all other Western Balkan countries and also Ambassador of the European Union to Montenegro Johann Sattler and Ambassador of the Italian Republic to Montenegro Andreina Marsella.

Summary of key messages and sessions.

- The first session, moderated by Professor Flockhart, was devoted to the question of **European security in light of global transformations**. The session was intended to

offer a bird's eye view of the many challenges facing European security, brought about by what is described as “the VUCA World”, a world that is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. In this sense, the session mainly focused on external changes and developments in the global environment and their impact on European security in general and the impact on EU policies vis-à-vis the Western Balkans and enlargement.

The session opened with a reflection on the significance of global order transformation, suggesting that the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represents a moment in European and global history akin to other pivotal moments such as 1648, 1815, 1919, 1945 and 1989. The introductory remarks reiterated the importance of distinguishing between the global rules-based order, which is in transformation and the liberal international order, which is contested and perhaps in decline but nevertheless likely to remain the main ordering format for the EU and its member states. The pressure is mounting on our existing governance institutions – including the EU, NATO and UN – to meet the many challenges in a cooperative and efficient manner yet within the context of the transformation of the global rules-based order and the emergence of alternative order led by Russia and China, cooperation is becoming increasingly difficult.

- The following session, moderated by Dr Zeneli, **Proposals from the Western Balkans for the next EU political cycle**, discussed the need to speed up reforms in the Western Balkans, as the next EU political cycle will likely see an intensified push for the Western Balkans to meet their benchmarks, considering the new geopolitical dynamics in Europe, and the increased Russian and Chinese influence in the region. The panel was characterised by general optimism as countries such as Montenegro are moving fast in opening in the EU path, as the first country in the region to open all negotiating chapters with the EU, making significant progress in the accession process. The discussion also focused on the EU's growth plan for the Western Balkans (adding EUR 6 billion for the period 2024-2027) as a driver for fostering economic growth, improving governance, consolidating democratic reforms, and promoting EU enlargement. In this context, EU enlargement is viewed not only as a political and security strategy for Europe but also as a pathway to promoting sustainable development, the rule of law, and stability in the region. Challenges in the region remain, as well as long-standing political and ethnic divisions and regional economic integration. The discussion also focused on the need to raise the capacities of the public administration to increase regional absorptive capacities.
- The final session, moderated by Professor Dzankic, focused on the topic of the **Future of EU Enlargement**. Participants discussed the perspectives for enlargement and how their dynamic has changed by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Introductory speeches highlighted that how enlargement will unfold in the coming years will depend on three key factors – (1) geopolitical circumstances affecting the EU's role in the world; (2) politics of institutional reform in the EU, especially as regards the modalities of accession and the use of veto rights in the enlargement process; and (3) the developments in the Western

Balkan states themselves. Clarity and consistency of the accession criteria have been identified as the key ingredients on the EU side, along with a credible membership perspective. For the Western Balkan states, capacity-building endeavours, especially regarding investment in human capital and courage to implement financially and politically costly reforms, have been noted as important steps in accession. The panel participants highlighted a series of positive developments in the context of the EU's perspectives on the region. After nearly a decade, the 'enlargement fatigue' of the EU and the 'accession fatigue' of the Western Balkans are overcome by the new momentum for 'widening' the European Union.

Next steps. The EUI will continue to support this discussion by organising the next high-level policy dialogues in the region in the fall of 2025. The aim of the next event is to continue the discussion on the themes mentioned above. The dialogue participants agreed that this format adds great value by providing ample space for all the relevant stakeholders to exchange views on current topics.

About the EUI

The EUI was established in Florence by the founding EU member states in 1972 as a university with the status of an international organisation. In 2017, the EUI founded the Florence School of Transnational Governance (STG) with a mission to develop current and future leaders, acting as a hub for training and innovation in public policy.

This event was organised in the context of the broader capacity-building project for Western Balkan diplomats that the EUI is implementing with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Through this project, around 65 public officials of the region have been trained at the EUI in Florence on topics related to EU policymaking and diplomatic skills to support the EU accession of the region and the widening initiative of the EUI towards the Western Balkan countries.

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