

Prospects for EU enlargement in the Balkans: the updated state of the art and the role of FAIC

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EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is an issue of great geopolitical significance, with significant implications for stability, security and economic development in the region. In recent years, the EU has intensified its efforts to integrate the Western Balkan countries, with the goal of promoting peace and prosperity in an area historically characterized by conflict and instability. On Nov. 8, 2023, the European Commission adopted a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, with the aim of bringing these countries closer to the EU by offering some of the benefits of membership before formal accession, stimulating economic growth and fostering socio-economic convergence.

Lack of convergence is a significant problem for the region, which currently stands at around 35 percent of the EU's average level of GDP per capita. This results in a limited revenue base to finance the accession process and related reforms, also contributing to massive external migration.

Progress toward economic convergence is a key priority in bringing the Balkan countries closer to the Union. The Growth Plan conceived by the EU has the potential to double the size of the Western Balkan economies over the next 10 years and, in addition, serves to concretely promote preparations for accession along with the need to accelerate reforms, anticipating some advantages that will directly benefit citizens.

Currently, six Western Balkan states are official or potential candidates for membership to the Union. This is the situation at a glance for each of the countries:

- Albania: applied for EU membership in April 2009 and was granted the status of candidate in June 2014. In 2022, accession negotiations were formally opened and in November 2023, the last meeting was held between experts from the European Commission and Albanian government officials, following which the first group of chapters was opened on the rule of law and democracy negotiations.

- Bosnia and Herzegovina: applied for EU membership in February 2016 and was granted candidate status in December 2022. In March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations, partly as a result of pressure from a group of countries, led by Italy, that strongly called for progress in the process.

- Kosovo: The Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU entered into force on 1 April 2016, and in December 2022, Kosovo applied for EU membership. Kosovo is also engaged in an EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia that is expected to lead to a comprehensive legally binding agreement on normalization of relations. The dialogue is currently stalled.

- North Macedonia: applied for EU membership in March 2004 and was granted candidate status in December 2005. In July 2022, accession negotiations started with the first intergovernmental conference, and in December 2023 the last meeting was held between experts from the

European Commission and Macedonian government officials to open the first group of chapters of the negotiations on rule of law and democracy.

- Montenegro: applied for EU membership in December 2008 and was granted candidate status in December 2010. Accession negotiations began in June 2012. To date, all 33 negotiating chapters related to Montenegro have been opened, but only three of them have been provisionally closed.

- Serbia: applied for EU membership in December 2009 and was granted the candidate status in March 2012. Accession negotiations began in January 2014. Serbia has opened 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters, two of which have been provisionally closed.

Challenges and opportunities

The prospects for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans present a number of serious challenges. The region faces structural difficulties such as corruption, weak democratic institutions and some persistent ethnic tensions. In addition, relations between some candidate countries and EU members can be complicated by unresolved bilateral issues, as in the case of the relations between Serbia and Kosovo and between Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

However, the Union's enlargement to the Western Balkans represents an important opportunity for the region, promising to bring political stability, economic growth and improvement in respect for human rights and the rule of law.

For the Union, integrating the Western Balkans means strengthening its geopolitical influence and promoting security and stability in Europe. After the current stalemate, referred to by some as *enlargement fatigue*, with the only "Balkan" exception of Croatia's entry 11 years ago, welcoming one or more new member countries would show an essential sign of optimism in the process of European construction.

FAIC's commitment

Since 1999, the FAIC has been an *ante litteram* tool in creating a framework for confrontation and collaboration at the level of mayors, authorities and local communities in the area, which has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to fostering the approach or, rather, the rapprochement of countries that for centuries shared a common Adriatic-Ionian home.

What we now call "urban diplomacy" or "city diplomacy" in fact adds opportunities for dialogue and exchange to relations between states and governments. Increasingly, at the European and global level, cities have become relevant actors in international cooperation: As highly-populated areas facing social, ecological and economic challenges, cities are the level of government that first has to seek solutions to many problems.

Through countless bilateral and multilateral initiatives, often in the context of European funding programs, the FAIC has made a concrete contribution to the creation of ties and cultural, social and economic growth of the European Adriatic and Ionian region to the extent that it has been recognized by the European Commission as an official stakeholder in the EUSAIR.

The next few years are crucial to furthering this process and strengthening that virtuous circle of cultural, social and economic growth to welcome all the states and peoples of the Western Balkans into the greater European family as soon as possible.

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