

New Visions for the Western Balkans: EU Accession and Regional Security

by Matteo Bonomi, Luisa Chiodi and Irene Rusconi

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ABSTRACT

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), with the assistance and sponsorship of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and under strategic partnership with the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation, organised the high-level closed-door conference "New Visions for the Western Balkans: EU Accession and Regional Security", held on 3 and 4 April 2023 at the Farnesina. The proceedings were opened by Antonio Tajani, Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and Tobias Billström, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, which holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Speeches followed from the foreign ministers of the six Balkan countries, who provided insights for the debates and interventions by leading experts from international organisations, institutions and civil societies. Contributions ranged from the prospects for future integration of the region into the EU, to the progress of the regional integration process, and the security challenges of the region in the current geopolitical context.

Western Balkans | EU enlargement | Italian foreign policy | Security | Migration

keywords

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Introduction

The Istituto Affari Internazionali and the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, with the organisational and financial support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in the framework of strategic partnership with Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation, organised a two-day conference in Rome on 3 and 4 April 2023 to discuss expectations and prospects for the medium-term future of the Western Balkan region.¹ They convened representatives of governments, institutions and civil societies to discuss in an informal setting the prospects for future integration of the region into the EU (Panel 1), the progress of the regional integration process (Panel 2) and the security challenges of the region in the current geopolitical context (Panel 3).

The conference was introduced with a keynote speech by the Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Antonio Tajani, who stressed how the Western Balkans constitute a priority of the new government. Minister Tajani recalled the recent initiatives undertaken that confirm such a commitment: from business diplomacy with the organisation of a business forum, to frequent political visits to the region and the decision to organise a new summit by the end

¹ For more information, see: Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Western Balkans' Summit in Rome with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia*, 2 April 2023, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?p=99054>. See also IAI website: <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16841>.

* Matteo Bonomi is Senior Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Luisa Chiodi is Director at the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). Irene Rusconi is an intern at IAI and a master's degree student in International Relations at LUISS Guido Carli.

Report of the high-level closed-door conference "New Visions for the Western Balkans: EU Accession and Regional Security", organised in Rome on 3-4 April 2023 by the Istituto Affari Internazionali and the Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, with the organisational and financial support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and the financial support of Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation or the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation.

of 2023 to verify the steps forward that have been undertaken. Minister Tajani also underlined that Italy is engaged to become a point of reference for the region, as an upholder of peace and economic growth for the six countries.

A second keynote speech was given by the Swedish Foreign Minister, Tobias Billström, currently chairing the Council of the EU, that welcomed the interest of the Italian government in reinvigorating European enlargement toward the Western Balkans in light of today's geopolitical situation. He recalled the need for the Balkan countries to engage in the reform process toward safeguarding the rule of law, but also the need for the EU to deliver the promised integration once the criteria are met.

The foreign affairs ministers of the six Balkan countries took part in the conference, and their political speeches were followed by contributions from a number of experts from international and civil society organisations.

1. Rebooting the EU accession

The core discussions in the first panel related to the new geopolitical context generated by the large-scale invasion of Ukraine since February 2022. In particular, the focus of the discussion was the European Council's decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 which, while widening the enlargement process, also had the effect of returning enlargement policy to the spotlight of the EU agenda. This new context allowed the relaunch of the process for the Western Balkans after a decade of profound crisis, generating new hopes and enthusiasm in the region.

The geostrategic importance arising from enlargement toward the Balkans became clearer after 2022, but some neighbouring countries remain, generally speaking, more supportive of enlargement policy, given that political instability, migration and economic transformation in the region affect them differently. Italy is one of these countries. However, the interdependence between the EU and the Western Balkans should become clearer today in the new international context, in security terms. More generally, it would be important to stress how the Western Balkans accession can benefit both the EU and the candidate countries.

Indeed, it was stressed that a primary goal remains the solving of the political conflicts that still haunt the region, since the current attempts to focus on economic cooperation cannot be successful if instability remains. As for the European Political Community, it may be an important platform for exchanging views on some pressing challenges that the continent is facing, although it cannot replace the EU accession process.

A synthetic slogan that summarises many contributions is that "EU solidarity should come before conditionality". It is well known that past decisions to integrate countries that were not ready resulted in negative consequences for all. But if the

enlargement process is high on the agenda, a joint integration agenda/plan can be identified in which both the EU institutions and the candidate countries can participate together.

An augmented EU commitment to the region is needed due to significant deterioration in local public opinion. Ensuring that the benefits of socio-economic integration are visible in the daily lives of citizens remains crucial in order to convince them that the sacrifices to join the Union are worth it. Rebooting the enlargement process is seen as necessary to give the Western Balkan population a taste of the benefits of the Union, so that they are not discouraged along the way on this difficult path.

Indeed, a shared view is that there is a need for new incentives to jumpstart this process, at both the national and the European level. Some stressed how this can be achieved by increasing pre-accession assistance (IPA), others advise opening structural and cohesion funds to EU candidate countries, while a third option would be to complete the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Single Market. Another shared view is that there is a dire need for new initiatives to speed up the accession process, together with the necessary domestic reforms in the candidate countries. In this regard, finally providing a clear definition of the notion of “phasing in” is essential. The concept was introduced by the European Commission in February 2020, within the new enlargement methodology, and suggested that candidate countries should start to gradually participate in selected EU policies; but since then the concept has lacked full operationalisation. The common idea is that it is necessary to reward the countries for any advancement they achieve, and to introduce mechanisms that enhance the process of integration even before full accession, not as an alternative to but to encourage the countries.

Moreover, involving the Western Balkans in high-level political dialogues and in the EU security architecture is seen as important by some. It is clear that today full alignment with the Common Security and Foreign Policy has a growing importance in response to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is no longer possible to accept opt-outs, as the policy is fundamental in today’s international context.

At the moment, the shift in priorities for the enlargement policy is primarily political, but it is not supported by a mobilisation of the administrative tools necessary for its achievement: the political message is not accompanied by a shift in action. Among the recipes to unlock political will and engagement on both sides, the most comprehensive is staged accession. The idea here is to frontload the benefits, while alleviating the concerns of the more sceptical members – in this way, when countries are ready, they can be integrated without fear of a lack of absorption capacity. This could be enacted by dividing the accession process into stages that must be very predictable: when a state reaches a good level of membership, it ought to be able to already unlock certain benefits, being rewarded for the level of compliance in proportion to the level reached. When these benefits come as a response, there will surely be a much more dynamic process for reforms

in the region. This needs to be added to the possibility of institutional participation with observer status, in order to anticipate an almost shared decision-making process: this proposal would create in the population the perception that the EU is truly interested in supporting their economic development and closing the gap between the EU institutions and the candidate states.

The opening of the accession process to Ukraine introduced a new time pressure for local political elites, which might be important in pushing the process forward so as not to be bypassed by a competing larger country. On the other hand, the risk is that the new geopolitical context reduces the importance of European values. The rule of law should remain a central component for any area of EU integration and for a smooth functioning of the Single Market.

2. Supporting regional integration

The second panel addressed the topic of regional cooperation and economic integration among the Western Balkan countries. It was stressed how regional cooperation retains a fundamental role to promote reconciliation, stability and growth, as well as to sustain these countries' European integration path. Indeed, a number of still unresolved regional issues, often directly deriving from the wars of the 1990s, continue to weigh on their prospects of EU membership, negatively affecting their economies and posing a number of political and security risks. It was also highlighted that the EU should continue to politically support regional cooperation based on sound rule-based multilateralism, providing further technical and financial assistance.

Indeed, it should be recalled that European and broader international support for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has been in place for a long time, at least since the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Stability Pact for Southeast Europe in 1999, during the last days of the Kosovo war. Since then, regional cooperation has become an integral part of EU conditionality for the region, and a mandatory condition that must be fulfilled by all the Western Balkan countries if they want to advance in their EU integration path – together with other EU accession criteria, as specified by Article 49 TEU and the European Councils of Copenhagen (1993), Madrid (1995) and Helsinki (1999). Over the years, regional cooperation initiatives have undoubtedly had a positive impact on the Western Balkans, proving to be pivotal in promoting stability and economic growth as well as advancing the EU agenda for the region in a number of fields, from trade liberalisation and market opening to police and security cooperation.

At the same time, a number of new regional initiatives have emerged in recent years, which were addressed in the second panel's primary discussion. These new regional plans have had the ambition to step up regional cooperation and to sustain full economic and market integration of the Western Balkans. They have emerged mostly in the context of the Berlin process, the intergovernmental initiative of engagement with the Western Balkans launched in 2014 by Angela

Merkel and joined by Austria, France, Italy, the UK, Poland and other countries, that was recently relaunched by the new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Under this format, Western Balkan leaders agreed on two important projects that constitute the fundamental framework for economic regional cooperation: the Multi-annual Action Plan on Regional Economic Area 2017–2019; and the Common Regional Market 2020–2024. These are crucial milestones for the creation of a common regional market, seeking to implement freedom of movement of goods, people, services and capital among the Western Balkan countries. In addition, Western Balkan leaders have endorsed the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (GAWB) at the Summit in Sofia in 2020, and subsequently the GAWB Action Plan at the Brdo Summit in October 2021. The Action Plan was prepared by the Regional Cooperation Council in Sarajevo and is in line with the EU ambition to become climate-neutral by 2050. All these projects have received substantial support from the European Commission, especially through the recent Economic and Investment Plan, which aims at mobilising up to 9 billion euro from IPA III for the period 2021–2027 and gaining additional investments of 20 billion euro through the Western Balkans Guarantee Facility.

In parallel, new developments have emerged under the so-called “Open Balkan” initiative which similarly promotes economic and political cooperation in the Western Balkans, but includes only Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia. The Open Balkan initiative, although surrounded by some controversy, is described as an attempt to improve political relations along with economic cooperation, following the example of the French-German rapprochement process.

Most of the speakers shared the view that any initiative focused on creating more cooperation is useful and should be encouraged. At the same time, some principles were highlighted, which could be useful to enhance synergies and sustainability of different cooperation schemes. First of all, it was highlighted that in order to foster positive and sustainable transformations in the region, all schemes should aim at the establishment of a common market based on four market freedoms, creating a region that is more cost-effective, competitive and attractive for investments. Another aspect that was stressed is that all initiatives should remain inclusive, be in line with EU values and standards, and be based on rule-of-law, if the aim of becoming part of the EU is to be on the horizon.

An interesting issue to analyse and understand is whether the common regional market can be effective enough to close the economic gap between the Balkan countries and the EU, or whether there is a need for more substantial financial aid or deeper phasing in. From the perspective of economic integration, more focus needs to be placed on poverty, quality of life and living standards in terms of purchasing power parity. In addition, with regard to the Green Agenda, implementation of the action plans is proceeding too slowly. It is clear that this also reflects the current energy crisis due to the Russian war, but any delay in the green transition is putting lives at risk on a daily basis – the region is in fact the most polluted part of the continent.

Moreover, it is good to reflect on a possible advancement of cooperation, elevating it from merely economic to also include security, since the war in Ukraine has made manifest the shared security challenges in the region. These reflections must all converge within the common regional market and the Berlin Process, so that they can be the basis for reflections on future developments of such initiatives.

The last point of the discussion was the crucial issue of the relations between regional integration schemes and EU integration. Although any attempt to advance integration is desirable and welcome, the risk is that such regional initiatives may be configured – or be perceived – as an alternative to the pre-accession process. Whereas intra-regional and EU integration could still be mutually reinforcing, today this might require additional policy instruments, since there are no structures transposing gains from one process to the other. That is why it is necessary for these regional integration initiatives and formats to be absorbed as much as possible within the enlargement process of the Union, ensuring more effective harmonisation of the different bilateral and multilateral policies in various fields.

3. Integrating approaches to security

The third panel addressed the current security concerns in the Western Balkans. Russia's war in Ukraine has exacerbated security threats throughout Europe, including Southeast Europe. All this makes it imperative for the EU and the Western Balkans to reaffirm their strategic commitment to adopt a joint approach to key security challenges.

The security challenges affecting the Western Balkan region are twofold. On the one hand, there are internal threats, including the rise of nationalism and the erosion of democratic institutions, which are also linked to the growth of corruption and organised crime. On the other hand, there are external security threats, such as terrorism, hybrid threats, media manipulation and disinformation campaigns.

It was noted that internally, the region is going through profound economic, political and social transformations. These have led states to face several challenges related to respect for democratic processes, the rule of law and weak governance, that have created vulnerabilities within states. This situation, in addition to unemployment and other economic problems, especially those consequent to the pandemic crisis and ethnic strife, may set the stage for new and further tensions that could destabilise the region. The perduring difficulties to reconcile with the past, which generate and fuel further disputes, exacerbate the situation.

Special attention was also devoted to organised crime, which represents one of the most serious security threats between the Western Balkans and the EU. It encompasses different issues, such as illegal trafficking, trafficking of human beings and money laundering. The current geopolitical situation has further aggravated the grip and wide range of organised crime action, precisely because conditions

of unrest and instability represent the most fertile ground for the proliferation of action of criminal groups – as the situation following the dissolution of Yugoslavia has shown.

Among the external threats, many interlocutors stressed how Russia fostered division and tensions and exploited fault lines to impede the integration of the Western Balkans in the Euro-Atlantic space. The Russian aggression has hit these countries severely, both economically and by posing direct security threats. The region has always been a Russian target for fostering tensions and conflicts. In particular, Russia is contributing to instability in the region through hybrid attacks, propaganda and spreading disinformation in the region.

In between the internal and external dimensions, management of migration remains among the key challenges in the region. During 2022, people entering the Western Balkans doubled in number, which has had the repercussion of an exponential increase in arrivals in the EU from the Western Balkans. One motivation could be the removal of barriers put in place as a result of the pandemic crisis, but also extremely relevant is the visa-free regime in some of the countries in the region. Smuggling of migrants remains the main cause, however, and indeed is on the rise. A current trend is also the arrival of both Russian and Ukrainian migrants into the region.

Obviously, all these trends are affecting the stability and security of the Western Balkans, negatively influencing the region. On the other hand, people are experiencing a peak in emigration from the Balkan states to European countries, especially from Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is due not only to economic reasons, but also to the lack of trust in institutions and diffused national corruption, which is reflected in the poor quality of services.

Although the EU has invested in migration policy, it continues to struggle in framing this policy globally and finding viable schemes to deal with migration at a common level. There is now a need to have more assessing capacity and solutions from the Western Balkans, as there has been a shift from a primarily transitional region to one that needs to play a role in migration management. This could help in the shift from pure emergency to a more long-term vision on migration.

Against this backdrop, collaboration between the EU and the Western Balkans should be based on the assumption that these states will be future members of the Union and will therefore have to meet the common security challenges together. Russian aggression has brought into focus the reality of the true partnership between the Western Balkans and the Union. This war is not just a threat locally, it is a real threat to international law and rule-based order, as well as a risk to the entire continent.

As for the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU common security and defence policy, the EU should be committed to integrating the countries of the region during preparation of the Foreign Affairs Council, in order to integrate

them even further into the work of the Council. On their side, states in the region themselves have to fully align their foreign policy priorities with those of the EU. As for military cooperation, this type of collaboration is more structured, since the Western Balkans are already part of civilian and military operations: for this reason, several funds are planned and have already been disbursed to support specific departments and sectors of the armies of individual states in the region.

However, the security framework that is being constructed must necessarily be inclusive, going beyond the military aspects, in order to include human security – namely consolidated democracy, social justice and economic development. This cannot happen unless a gender lens is applied, because only by bringing the whole society together can a comprehensive level of security and a stable environment be truly achieved. To this end, of paramount importance is the role of civil society, which through regional cooperation can bring the people of the Balkans together. In addition, the role of women is of primary significance: indeed, the link that exists between gender equality, peace-building and democratic governance, which are mutually reinforcing, must be recognised. The different perspectives on peace-building that women bring to the table go beyond military and territorial aspects, introducing social and humanitarian considerations.

Conference Programme

Rome, 3 April 2023

Welcoming remarks

Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, President, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Opening address

Antonio Tajani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Italy

Tobias Billström, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sweden, holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union

Panel I: Promoting EU-Western Balkans' integration. What future for the region?

Chair **Luisa Chiodi**, Director, Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT)

Perspectives from Sarajevo, Pristina and Skopje

Elmedin Konaković, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Donika Gërvalla-Schwarz, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora

Bujar Osmani, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Panellists **Vincenzo Celeste**, Director General for Europe and International Trade Policy, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Danijela Gacevic, Deputy Director, CEFTA Secretariat

Steven Blockmans, Director of Research, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

Milena Lazarević, Programme Director, European Policy Centre (CEP)

Simonida Kacarska, Director, European Policy Institute (EPI)

Panel II: Supporting regional cooperation and integration among the Western Balkan countries

Chair **Matteo Bonomi**, Senior Fellow, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Perspectives from Tirana, Podgorica and Belgrade

Olta Xhaçka, Minister of European and Foreign Affairs

Dritan Abazović, Prime Minister and Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs

Ivica Dačić, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs

Panellists **Roberto Antonione**, Secretary General, Central European Initiative (CEI)
Amer Kapetanović, Head of Political Department, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)
Aleksandra Tomanić, Executive Director, European Fund for the Balkans (EFB)
Marko Čadež, President, Managing Board of the Chamber of Commerce of the Western Balkans 6
Daliborka Uljarević, Executive Director, Centre for Civic Education (CCE)

Panel III: Promoting a joint approach to common security challenges in the Western Balkans

Chair **Nicoletta Pirozzi**, Head of Programme – EU Politics and Institutions and Institutional Relations Manager, Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Perspectives from Brussels

Marko Makovec, Deputy Managing Director of the European External Action Service

Panellists **Catherine Fearon**, Deputy Director of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre and Deputy Head, OSCE Secretariat
Laura Lungarotti, Sub-Regional Coordinator for the Western Balkans and Chief of IOM Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina
Alessandro Politi, Director, NATO Defence College Foundation
Loredana Teodorescu, Head of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN)
Ardian Hackaj, Research Director and Coordinator of Tirana Connectivity Forum

Closing remarks

Pasquale Terracciano, Director General for Public and Cultural Diplomacy, Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Global Politics and Security* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 6976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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Director: Alessandro Marrone (a.marrone@iai.it)

- 23 | 10 Matteo Bonomi, Luisa Chiodi and Irene Rusconi, *New Visions for the Western Balkans: EU Accession and Regional Security*
- 23 | 09 Leo Goretti, *La sicurezza italiana e la guerra contro l'Ucraina: i punti di vista degli esperti*
- 23 | 08 Manuel Herrera, *The War in Ukraine and the Future of Non-proliferation and Arms Control in the European Continent*
- 23 | 07 Dario Cristiani, *Europe's Evolving Order and the War in Ukraine*
- 23 | 06 Ottavia Credi, Giancarlo La Rocca e Alessandro Marrone, *Il dominio spaziale e la minaccia cyber*
- 23 | 05 Alessandro Marrone e Elio Calcagno, *Sistemi di combattimento navali: sviluppi e sfide*
- 23 | 04 Nicolò Fasola et al., *Space – Exploring NATO's Final Frontier*
- 23 | 03 Leo Goretti and Irene D'Antimo, *Italy between the Draghi and Meloni Governments*
- 23 | 02 Ilaria Bertocchini, *Women and Conflicts: What Role for Women Mediator Networks?*
- 23 | 01 Alessandro Marrone and Elio Calcagno (eds), *Naval Combat Systems: Developments and Challenges*