



Report



**MAKING ENLARGEMENT WORK
AGAIN: SUPPORTING WESTERN
BALKANS THROUGH THE
EXPERIENCES OF CENTRAL
AND EASTERN EUROPE**

October 2024

About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.



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On September 12th, EUROPEUM's Brussels Office representing the Think Visegrad platform in cooperation with Egmont Royal Institute organized a public conference titled **"Making enlargement work again: Supporting Western Balkans through the experiences of Central and Eastern Europe"**. This event took place at the Egmont Palace with a participation of 68 people.

The conference was opened by a keynote speech by Ambassador Bálint Ódor, Permanent representative of Hungary to the EU. His speech focused on the presentation of priority topics for the Hungarian 2024 Presidency to the Council of the EU, including the support of the countries of Western Balkans. Mr. Ódor stressed the importance of the approximation of the region towards the EU and various benefits the enlargement towards the Western Balkans would bring the EU, including the fields of security, migration or trade. He also mentioned **historical and cultural ties which not only Hungary, but all the V4 countries have with the region, which define the strong support towards the Western Balkan countries.**

Following the keynote speech, the first panel of the conference, titled "Twenty years of membership: How did the 2004 enlargement shape the EU and its new members?" kicked off. The panellists first discussed whether we still witness the distinction between the "old" and "new" Member states on the level of the EU. Pavel Telička, former European Commissioner and Vice-President of the European Parliament argued that this division is certainly not present on the level of the Council or European Council and that Member States rather cooperate according to specific policies. He however admitted that the **branding of "new" and "old"**

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is still present when it comes to communication, or representation within the EU institutions, where Members like France, Belgium or Italy are still heavily overrepresented.

Another speaker, Vladislava Gubalova representing Globsec, disagreed with the previously mentioned statements, saying that she still observes the divisions between the old and new members, especially when it comes to the influence within the EU. She also mentioned that the process of the EU accession of the V4 countries and later on problems of democratic backsliding within certain new members still serve as an argument against future enlargements.

These statements then bridged the discussion towards the lessons learned from the 2004 enlargement. Jean-Louis De Brouwer from Egmont Institute described his personal experience with the accession of ten new countries as a civil servant within the European Commission. According to him, the EU has succeeded in many aspects of integrating the new members. However, **functioning under a bigger number of Member states also provided new challenges, especially in the decision-making processes.** He argued that for the next enlargements to be successful, the EU has to learn from these mistakes and reflect it in the Treaties. He, however, sees that highly unlikely due to the complexity of possible Treaty revisions, therefore questioning whether there can be a future enlargement towards the Western Balkans or Eastern Europe.

Mr. Telička, who acted as a Chief negotiator of the Czech EU accession argued that the crucial work has to come from the candidate countries as many of them, especially those from the Western Balkans, struggle with advancing through the accession process and adoption of *acquis*. He agreed that the experiences of CEE members joining the EU in 2004 are still valuable and can be transferred to the current candidates for example by training of negotiation teams, boosting

capacities of their state administrations or through enhanced socialization with EU members, for example during informal Council meetings.

After a coffee break, the conference continued with a second panel dedicated to the topic of **“Forgotten enlargement to the Western Balkans: Can the process be revived in 2024?”** with Jana Juzová from EUROPEUM, Julianna Armas from HIIA and Andjelka Dzikic representing the Mission of Montenegro as speakers.

Experts agreed that despite initial skepticism of the Western Balkan countries to the fast progress of Ukraine and Moldova, the Union has this year delivered also on some aspects of the region’s long-stalled EU integration. Bosnia and Herzegovina received a positive decision on its accession negotiations by the European Council, the European Commission introduced the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and Montenegro progressed to the closing stages of its accession process. **The key goal of the EU’s approach to the region has been to restore trust in their membership perspective and to showcase that progress will be allowed when the candidates invest effort into the required reforms.**

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Ms. Dzikic presented the goals of Montenegro to move swiftly towards the accession to the EU and closed all the chapters within the next couple of years. After years of stalling caused not only due to political crises in the country, the new government has communicated clearly that it wishes to join the EU by 2028 and become the 28th member state, setting the standards for the other candidates.

Having a clear target was praised by the remaining speakers who argued that such initiative should be seen more often from the side of the candidate countries. Ms. Juzová later dwelled into the newly presented Growth plan for **the Western**

Balkans which, according to her, **provides a solid framework for enhanced cooperation with the region**, provides further incentives to all the countries while setting clear conditionality mechanisms for the implementation of projects under this financial instrument. She also stressed the importance of involving candidate countries, either directly or indirectly, into key EU strategies and policies.

Lastly, Ms. Armás discussed concrete outcomes we should expect from the Hungarian presidency in regard to the Western Balkans and discussed the importance of clear communication towards the region and better understanding of its internal dynamics. She also supported the idea of creating tangible rewards for the candidates also in the pre-accession phase through gradual integration model.

The conference was concluded by closing remarks from Pol De Witte, Director General at Egmont Institute.