



MERCATOR EUROPEAN DIALOGUE

European Enlargement at a Crossroads

Proceedings from the Political Seminar held in Rome on July, 17th 2015

edited by

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On Friday July 17th, The *Istituto Affari Internazionali* hosted the first thematic meeting of the Mercator European Dialogue project, in Rome, on the topic of “EU Enlargement at a Crossroad”.

The Mercator European Dialogue project aims to offer a **space for dialogue for members of national parliaments to exchange ideas on the future of Europe**, and the participation in a network of parliamentarians providing the opportunity for networking, channeling national concerns at the European level and for dialogue across parliamentary actors of different member states.

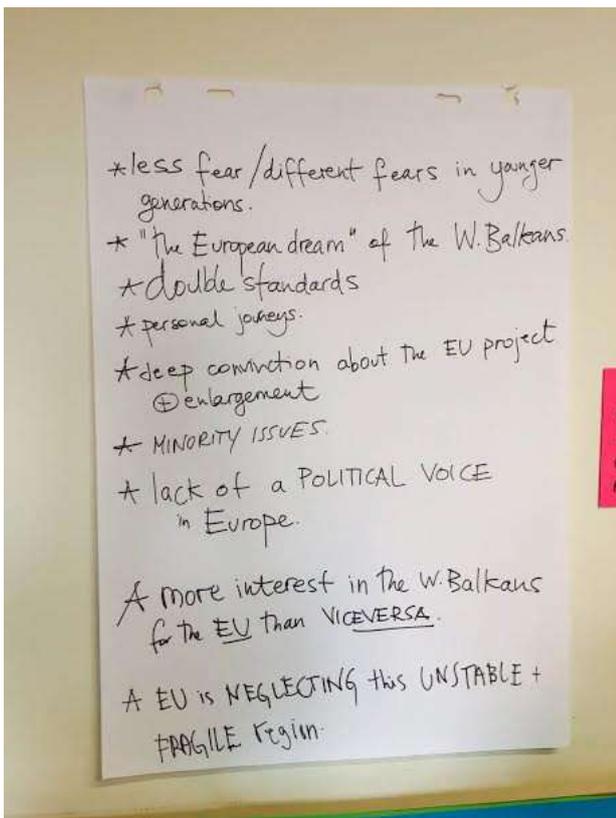
The topic of enlargement was chosen for this first meeting as the EU continues to have a distinct advantage and responsibility in the Western Balkans and yet Enlargement is a policy whose sense of direction is openly contested.

Trust in enlargement policy is declining in the EU and candidate countries alike yet at the same time, there is no alternative to a credible enlargement policy for the EU in the Balkans today. South-eastern Europe is a region where the EU retains substantial influence and is capable of bringing about real change. Yet the EU’s advantage in the region cannot be taken for granted.

The challenge is twofold. On the one hand, finding ways to empower reformers in the Western Balkans in order to promote economic integration and development in the region. On the other, to help rethink method enlargement policy making pre-accession policy more credible, and restoring trust within the EU and the candidate countries that enlargement can indeed be a win-win for all. Elites and publics in the region risk otherwise turning away from the EU, looking for inspiration and support elsewhere.

People, Journeys and Politics

The first session provided an opportunity for Members of Parliament who did not previously know one another to **connect** and get to know each others' story and where they were coming from. Understanding each others' background and perspective was designed to support them in **engaging in deeper dialogue**. Parliamentarians who already knew each other, recognized that they rarely have "the opportunity to work together in such an open format on a topic of shared interest".



Participants were asked to **share their experience in politics and their views relative to the topic of enlargement**. What emerged were **shared and contrasting hopes and fears**, on both sides of the geographical and the generational divides. On one side, the ardent desire for **'more Europe'**, a deep conviction about the EU project as a whole and the necessary role it is to play in the Balkans, coupled with **anger and disillusionment** towards the neglect that the EU has demonstrated towards the region, emerged forcefully. On the other, and in contrast with a narrative of marginalization, **a narrative of opportunity** and the **"taking for granted" of basic acquired freedoms** was consciously recognized by participants who have been at the centre of European politics both for geographic and generational reasons, the Erasmus generation in core Member States acting as case in point.

What instead **united participants** was first and foremost **the perception of a lack of any solid and clear political voice and perspective for the EU** - where policy has been obscured by process - and a shared understanding that this **problem needs to be urgently addressed**. Secondly, and perhaps a little more unexpectedly, was the overwhelming **empathy shared across the participants towards the Greek crisis**, which was identified as an issue which is, and should be, both a shared European concern and an issue which will mark a defining moment in the history of the identity and future of the EU.

The session allowed participants to acquire a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations and personal journeys that informed the political views of fellow parliamentarians.

Expert presentations inform the debate

The following session provided participants with short presentations from policy experts on the issues of **internal reforms in the Balkan states, regional economic and security developments** and insight into the underlying rationale behind the **EU's enlargement fatigue**. These presentations fed into the following debate aimed at identifying the key topics for further discussion. Some of the key points addressed are summarised below.

Francisco de Borja Lasheras, ECFR on ongoing domestic reforms and developments in candidate and potential candidate countries:

- **The current situation of enlargement.** From the perspective of deep democracy and transformation, the region is experiencing different forms of backsliding and rollbacks on core Copenhagen criteria such as freedom of media or rule of law. It is unclear whether the enlargement policy is really fostering a substantial transformation, or rather superficial changes. "Old habits" of state capture, clientelism, polarization and (opportunistic) nationalism persist. There is a growing perception that progress of previous years is at risk, particularly in a context of geopolitical tensions, lack of reconciliation (e.g. ongoing tensions over the Srebrenica commemorations) and loss of credibility of the European model.
- **Emerging trends.** Overall, the region sits somewhere in a political and geopolitical limbo, blending old habits, geopolitics, as well as elements of European-style modernization. There are elements of authoritarianism and illiberal politics (a Balkan Orbanism or Putinism); a political discourse around "Europe" and Europeanization, coupled with domestic speech marked by Polarization, populism and irredentism, with consequences for the region's rupture points (Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia); plus new elements of popular empowerment claims (the Balkan "indignados").
- **Challenges for democratic institution (and state) building.** From the perspective of those institutions and actors (local and international) involved in reforms and standard setting, some core challenges are: i) clear standards but unclear benchmarks (e.g. when can we establish that rule of law is sustainable, or good governance is taking hold?); ii) tension between a transformative narrative of deep reform, requiring strict conditionality, and an anchoring narrative, requiring diplomatic trade-offs; iii) the risks of dependency on external actors and lack of reform ownership; iv) the added challenge of not only institution building (e.g. Serbia) but basic statehood building (e.g. Kosovo) and post-conflict stabilization (e.g. Macedonia, Bosnia); v) key decision-makers required to implement reforms often against their interests and power networks.

Dimitar Bechev, LSE on Regional Developments and Economic Reform:

- **Substance over Process.** EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is proceeding but process doesn't deliver substance - there's authoritarian drift in a number of places, economies are stagnating.

- **Economic crisis and the Eurozone troubles have taken a heavy toll on local economies.** The Western Balkans took a blow from the contraction in core trading partners and face difficulties to benefit from the (sluggish) recovery within the Eurozone. Export-led growth, to replace the pre-2008 model based on domestic consumption and investment, is tough to achieve. The fiscal situation is challenging in a number of places, e.g. Serbia, BiH. Croatia, which was supposed to be a role model, is only now bouncing back after long years of recession.
- **The need for Regional Integration.** The EU can do good to restart local economies by spurring regional integration. But the current Western Balkan 6 format might not be fully appropriate. Telecom cables and highways do not end at the borders of the WB region but cross into EU members from wider South East Europe. Institutions such as the Regional Cooperation Council, plus the South East European Cooperation Process, should assume greater responsibility.

Corina Stratulat, EPC on Future Prospects for Enlargement and EU Enlargement Fatigue:

- **The responsibility of Member States.** Even if the accession track remains open to the Balkan countries, the process is derailed not just by outstanding challenges pertaining to the region but often by hurdles which develop within the EU – more specifically in the member states. The frequency of incursions and opportunities for the member states to interfere and derail the process has increased over the past years suggesting a ‘nationalisation’ of enlargement.
 - **A loss of leverage and credibility.** While member states’ hands-on approach and tough line on the dossier is justified as a win-win strategy - helping to transform the Balkan aspirants into good member states and to assuage domestic concerns with the potential consequences of future EU entries - it also influences the enlargement agenda in unpredictable ways and with uncertain outcomes. Departing from agreed conditions and procedures, coupled with growing volatility on the part of the member states, undermines the credibility of enlargement, the EU’s transformative leverage in the region and the role of the European Commission (previously seen as the driver of the policy).
 - **Politics in the way of progress?** The present dynamics between the EU and the Balkans serve as a prime example of politics getting in the way of progress: on both sides, those in power and responsible for delivering success need to make more of an effort and to find new meaningful ways of reengagement with each other on the basis of shared values and interests. Politics needs to be a catalyst not an obstacle to enlargement.
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Identifying Priority Areas

The following session opened up the room to small-group debate aimed at identifying a number of priority areas which were deemed most relevant by the participants to the end of revitalizing the enlargement policy. Whilst a number of relevant topics were discussed, these were finally aggregated into **four main priority areas** which the participants expressed an interest in exploring further due to their instrumental role in **defining the future of enlargement policy**. These were:



The rules for accession and the right to veto

The impossibility of achieving any form of a coherent enlargement policy within the current rules and voting structures was underlined. "One can be the 'best student' in the neighbourhood and yet have their accession vetoed". On the one hand, participants denounced the extremely inefficient accession procedures in place and the way these undermine the credibility of the policy as well as the credibility of the EU's role as a regional player. On the other hand, more pragmatic participants, keeping in mind the view from Brussels, underlined the difficulty of changing such rules. For example, the abolition of the veto power by member states over accession would require a treaty reform, and the likelihood of such a prerogative being given up by Member States was judged as very unlikely.

The role of enlargement in the future of Europe: How to create a positive narrative

There was widespread recognition that many (verging on all) problems tied to the enlargement policy in fact reflect problems which are both internal and endogenous to the EU. The lack of a clear political vision of the EU's future is undermining the Union's ability to coherently and purposefully engage with its neighbours. The negative perception of enlargement, rather than that of an opportunity for the EU, was also denounced as an important cause contributing to enlargement fatigue. The need to rediscover a win-win situation and a positive narrative attributable to enlargement policy was underlined.

Regional approach and development

The need for the Western Balkans to act as a region and to be addressed as a region was underlined. On the one hand, the EU needs to be aware that it cannot treat each single state in isolation in order to achieve stability. On the other hand, single Balkan countries must up cooperation amongst themselves if they are to speak to the EU as a single voice and thus speed up the process of accession. A rapprochement to the EU can be enacted unilaterally by the Balkans if an avenue for regional cooperation is pursued and momentum towards more regional initiatives is galvanized to this end.

Geopolitical challenges in the Western Balkans: Russia and Turkey



The increasing sympathy towards and interest of Russia in the region was underlined as a factor to be taken into serious consideration by the EU when shaping its relations with its neighbours. Similarly the evolving role of Turkey in the region and its role as a global player should inform relations between the Western Balkans and the EU. A more realistic approach was demanded of the EU in understanding and openly addressing geopolitical issues which are shaping ever more forcefully the Balkan region. The Ukraine crisis demonstrates that when the EU fails to sufficiently take into consideration geopolitics, it risks opening the way for instability and conflict.

Ultimately the participants were asked to vote on which priority area they considered most relevant for the day's discussions. An **overwhelming majority** voted in favour of discussing **the role of enlargement in the future of Europe** and the necessity of creating a new positive narrative for enlargement policy. The remaining participants were initially divided over the topic of a regional approach to enlargement and the topic of **geopolitical challenges**, although ultimately decided to prioritize the latter.

New Paths for Reinvigorating Enlargement Policy

The participants were then divided into two discussion groups, one per topic, and asked to discuss the identified theme in order to define a number of actions that could serve to reinvigorate the enlargement policy. The participants were asked to be pragmatic and adopt a problem-solving approach and reflect on what initiatives could to some extent be brought forward and implemented directly by those present in the room.

A number of parallels emerged, above all, **the need for new and better avenues for dialogue for national members of parliament** was identified as a main priority in both groups, in order to reinforce official channels for cooperation or, on the flipside, bypass these where an impasse has been reached. Whilst often having the possibility to working together as fellow regional parliamentarians, the participants recognized that the opportunities for a profound and comprehensive dialogue, like the one they were able to engage in on this occasion, were few.

On the one hand, the group discussing geopolitical implications in the region underlined **the need for the Western Balkan states to intensify dialogue around interest-based initiatives** in order to **strengthen regional cooperation** and generate a positive regional narrative. On the other hand, the group discussing the EU's future and the role of enlargement within the latter, agreed that a **new and better dialogue was necessary between candidate, potential candidate countries and member states** in order to **reset the negatively tainted narrative** which is driving enlargement policy to a halt.

Specifically, each of the two fora for dialogue proposed by the participants would be subject to a number of characteristics.

Inter-regional dialogue: Striking a balance between regionalism and the need to pursue national interests was seen as necessary to design a new space for inter-regional dialogue. There was a desire for cooperation between Balkan states alongside the recognition of the need for bilateral discussions with the EU and specific

member states. The need to find a common voice, and thus a stronger voice, vis-à-vis the EU despite differences was underlined forcefully. The clearest aspiration articulated by the group as a result of this new venue for dialogue was to ensure that Balkan states were at least **not working against each other**. The overarching aim being to seek avenues for collaboration on common interests without ignoring national priorities and needs. On the contrary, recognizing these, and working with them.

In particular, the forum would seek to:

- identify and seize opportunities for collaboration in fields such as energy, river management, infrastructure...
- discover and explore common themes of interest and action
- work through dialogue on reconciliation
- fight corruption and crime through cooperation and exchange of best practices
- share experiences (e.g. Croatia's enlargement process) and learn from these

Intra-regional dialogue: The need to completely reset the narrative around enlargement was deemed imperative, and a new forum for candidates, potential candidates and member states' parliamentarians was identified as the best channel for this end to be achieved. The forum would work on showcasing and creating win-win situations around specific initiatives tied to shared interests. The positive engagement of national politicians in the process of constructing and shaping relations with the EU was called for. Finally, the impossibility of changing the treaties in the short term, and the limited impact that Balkan countries could have vis-à-vis the EU's lack of a future vision, highlighted the need for an alternative track, through which to build a de facto rapprochement based on Balkan-led initiatives for more cooperation.

In particular, the forum would seek to:

- hold bilateral, trilateral (or more) talks without the obligation of being all-inclusive
 - Move away from the 'enlargement' rhetoric and symbolism adopting a new term, e.g. 'regional consolidation dialogue' to approach the issue
 - Bypass enlargement talks without duplicating these
 - produce concrete results with each dialogue focusing on very specific themes (e.g. energy, migration, infrastructure) and identify initiatives to be pursued
 - Include and Identify agents of reform to be included in talks: Include diverse 'inspirational forces' out of the ordinary players as 'guests' to the dialogues; Include EU institutional representatives, ad hoc, as 'guests' to the dialogues
 - Share and create new success stories through interest-oriented initiatives and reshape national debates through a new shared positive narrative, making politics a catalyst and not an obstacle for the Balkans' enlargement aspirations.
 - Address the concerns of individual member states vis-à-vis enlargement through one-on-one dialogues
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Outcomes and Next Steps

The meeting saw the participation of a number of European Members of Parliament from south-east Europe and a number of neighbourhood and enlargement policy experts. The composition of participants reflected the geographical interest towards the topic of enlargement and allowed for a constructive discussion to take place. Agreeing swiftly on the fundamental principle of the strategic importance of such a policy, the debate quickly moved onto the identification of priority areas of action needed to revitalize the enlargement process. Whilst a wider participation from northern member states would have been welcome, the endogenous self-selection process that characterizes participation to the Mercator European Dialogues will inevitably lead to participation in the thematic workshops to over-represent those Member States most responsive to the topic being discussed. Nevertheless, the outcomes and learning from these dialogues will feed into the next level of conversation to be held in Berlin on September 4-5th, offering the opportunity to those MPs having participated in the enlargement discussions to feed their views to a wider audience and a more varied group of MPs, having had the opportunity to explore and debate the topic in more depth across a number of committed MPs .