



EU enlargement and the Western Balkans: Current challenges and prospects

Conference proceedings



University of Tirana
Institute of European Studies

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Introduction

EU enlargement policy is one of the main instruments that the EU uses for reaffirming the success of its model and for contributing to peace and stability in the continent and beyond. Despite the successes of this policy in the past, bringing the Union from 6 to 27 members, the Western Balkan's European integration process is proving to be more difficult than previous accessions. The aim of the conference where these proceedings are based upon was to explore in-depth and try to understand and discuss main issues and challenges regarding EU Enlargement, with a particular focus on Albania and the Western Balkans. This publication is divided into three main parts:

In the first part, research contributions try to explore and explain the repercussions of regional and global developments on the EU, and on its enlargement strategy. The Russia-Ukraine war is at the centre of the section, including its impact on the EU-Russia relations. The articles analyze the reasons and consequences of the war from different perspectives, focusing also on its spillover in the EU approach towards enlargement. Membership negotiations are a key part in the EU accession process and the enlargement policy. In this regard, the 2020 revised methodology has generated a broad discussion on its components and how they can improve the European integration process of the Western Balkans countries. This section explores also the new methodology under different perspectives, trying to discuss its potential efficacy for the process, the impact it might have on the accession process, and how the EU is introducing elements to strengthen conditionality. In addition, the section aims at introducing and discussing critical approaches to the new methodology.

The second part focuses on some key components of the enlargement criteria, part of the fundamentals under the new methodology. More specifically, the section discusses the justice system in Albania and its reform efforts, in view of the EU accession process. Albania has gone through a rather radical judiciary reform since 2016 and it is useful to analyse its impact and its connection with the European integration process of the country. In addition, political criteria are also discussed and critically assessed.

The European integration process is based on the approximation with EU values, standards, and legislation. In this context, the panel addresses some of the main challenges encountered in the transposition of EU *acquis* into domestic legislation in Albania. A few crucial policy sectors are also explored, with the aim of explaining patterns and main components of the approximation

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