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Dialogue on the Future of Europe: Is Enlargement a Key to the Future?

- **ABSTRACT:** *This article concludes the presentations made at and the main lessons drawn from the international conference on Western Balkan enlargement held on December 6, 2021, within the framework of the pan-European dialogue on the future of Europe. The event was the fourth high-level international conference on the Future of Europe co-organized by the Ferenc Mádl Institute and the Ministry of Justice, and was attended by representatives of the European Union (EU), Hungarian, Serbian, and Slovenian politicians; and representatives from academia. The article briefly presents the EU context and the background of the enlargement in the Western Balkans. The presentations at the conference—almost without exception—highlighted the issues of credibility, political, economic, security, and strategic interests of the future of Europe in thinking about the future of the enlargement. Even though there are some slight differences regarding their approach to specific issues related to the advancement of European integration of the Western Balkans, every participant stressed the importance and urgency of their accession. The Hungarian government’s stance consisting of a firm support to the EU accession of the Western Balkans based and justified on their merits and the accomplishment of the required criteria, especially with regard to Serbia, was reaffirmed. In view of all this, the organization of the international conference by the Ferenc Mádl Institute of Comparative Law and the Ministry of Justice can be considered very timely and proactive.*

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- **KEYWORDS:** enlargement, Western Balkans, conference on the future of Europe, European Commission, European strategic interest.

Following the success of the three previous high-level international conferences, the Ministry of Justice and the Mádl Ferenc Institute for Comparative Law organized a fourth international conference⁵ in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe⁶ on December 6, 2021.⁷ The event, titled “Dialogue on the Future of Europe: Is Enlargement a Key to the Future?,” aimed to facilitate discussions among the Member States and Western-Balkan countries on the future of Europe and the complexities of the enlargement.

It outlined the different interests and aspects of enlargement as seen by high-level politicians, the European Commissioner, acknowledged members of academia, and key stakeholders. The views expressed at the conference reaffirmed the need for common thinking on the future of a geographically expanded Europe, which is essential both to reinforce and preserve the credibility of the European Union (EU).

Status quo—The Western Balkans on their way to the EU

After a decade of enlargement fatigue,⁸ in his 2017 State of the Union address,⁹ former President of the European Commission *Jean-Claude Juncker* reaffirmed the European future of the Western Balkan countries. The speech was followed by the release of a key document¹⁰ by the European Commission on February 6, 2018. The document outlined that the Western Balkans are part of Europe, and that the people of the EU and the region have a common heritage and history, and a future defined by shared opportunities and challenges. The EU’s enlargement policy must be part and parcel of the larger strategy to strengthen the Union by 2025. It is an investment in the EU’s security, economic growth, and influence; and in its ability to protect its citizens. The document introduced goals

5 For the program and the synopsis of the conference, see: <http://mfi.gov.hu/en/esemenyek/dialogue-on-the-future-of-europe-is-enlargement-a-key-to-the-future/> [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

6 On January 22, 2020, the European Commission published its concept for a conference on the future of Europe, see: *Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe*, COM (2020) 27 final.

7 The videos of the conference can be accessed here <http://mfi.gov.hu/en/esemenyek/dialogue-on-the-future-of-europe-is-enlargement-a-key-to-the-future/> [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

8 Jana Juzová (April 2018) *Enlargement to the Western Balkans: Finally ready to Commit?* *Euro-peum Monitor, Eastern Monitor*, see: <https://www.europeum.org/data/articles/vit-the-western-balkans-on-their-way-to-the-eu.pdf> [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

9 See: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_17_3165 [Accessed: 18 January 2022]

10 A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans COM(2018) 65 final, see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

to achieve for each of the countries by 2025 and included several initiatives providing support to the Western Balkan countries.

On February 5, 2020, the Commission published another key document.¹¹ This Communication set out the Commission's concrete proposals for strengthening the whole accession process. Their overall aim seemed to be to enhance credibility and trust on both sides and yield better results on the ground.

On May 6, 2020, President of the European Commission *Ursula von der Leyen* issued a statement¹² at the joint press conference with *President Michel* and *Andrej Plenković*, Prime Minister of Croatia, following the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit, where she said that “the Western Balkans belong in the EU.”

The most recent document issued by the Commission was the *2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*,¹³ which took stock of developments since the last *Enlargement Package*, adopted in October 2020,¹⁴ and reinforced in writing the European perspective of the Western Balkans.

The reality of the Western Balkan enlargement is unquestionable in the context of the debate on the future of Europe. Moreover, as Hungary has always been and continues to be a great supporter of Western Balkan enlargement, Budapest served as a great venue to keep this important topic on the table.

Presentation of the results of the conference “Dialogue on the future of Europe: Is enlargement a key to the future?”

The first panel of the international conference was opened by *Judit Varga*, Minister of Justice of Hungary. The panel also featured *Péter Szijjártó*, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, *Olivér Várhelyi*, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, *Jadranka Joksimović*, Minister for Integration of Serbia, *Andor Deli*, Member of the European Parliament, and *Gašper Dovžan*, Slovenian Secretary of State. The speakers first presented their points of view and subsequently answered questions from the audience. *Kinga Gál*, Member of the European Parliament, was the moderator of this panel.

11 Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans (COM 2020) 57 final, see: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-02/enlargement-methodology_en.pdf [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

12 Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel and Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, following the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit, see: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_825 [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

13 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy COM(2021), see: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/2021-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

14 2020 Communication on EU enlargement policy https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

Judit Varga spoke about the Conference on the Future of Europe as an excellent opportunity to discuss key issues related to the successful and safe future of European citizens. She highlighted the enlargement as a priority for the Hungarian government, emphasizing that Hungary supports several concrete projects in the region through the International Visegrád Fund.¹⁵ These projects concern various areas such as education, innovation, regional development, or reinforcement of the business sector. She welcomed that Ursula von der Leyen named the Western Balkan enlargement as a priority for the Commission¹⁶. She spoke about the necessity of common efforts toward the restoration of the EU's credibility. For the minister, the time has come to welcome new countries in our community and build a stronger Europe based on strong Member States. The Western Balkans geographically, historically, and economically belong to the European family; and this family has to be strong and united. The minister highlighted the importance for the EU to recognize the candidate countries' efforts and reforms, emphasizing that the EU must also fulfill its obligations toward the advancement of integration. Finally, she underlined that the EU enlargement is the cornerstone of a safe, prosperous, stable, and competitive European future that must build upon our common interests and cooperation. The minister confirmed—as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated in his seven points on the future of Europe—that the Hungarian Government's position is that Serbia must be admitted to the EU and that the EU needs Serbia much more than Serbia needs the EU.

Péter Szijjártó sees the future of the EU in the Member States, and not in Brussels. He noted that the EU can be strong if its Member States are strong; therefore, competencies related to migration, economic, and sanitary emergencies must be maintained at a national level. He underlined that the global economic weight of the EU has diminished in the last few years, while our competitors were able to maintain or even increase their share. He criticized the efforts toward stopping internal competition among the Member States, because this diminishes the EU's external competitiveness. He underlined that only the Member States can effectively stop the migration flow, and, therefore, the EU needs to support them, emphasizing that the common migration policy has failed as Europe is under migration pressure from three directions. The minister urged the EU to integrate the Western Balkans, as third actors will increase their influence in the region otherwise. As he put it, there is no vacuum in geopolitics. The minister sees the enlargement as a key to reinforce the EU, especially after the loss of Great Britain. In his closing remarks, he noted that instead of dealing with issues that do not fall under the competence of the EU, EU institutions should focus on issues that are truly common competence, such as enlargement.

Olivér Várhelyi believes that following conflicts, the European perspective is the key driver of consolidation. The commissioner, in addition to stating that Europe can only

15 See: <https://www.visegradfund.org> [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

16 Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel and Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, following the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit, see: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_825 [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

become stronger if the Western Balkans are fully integrated, also made it clear that only Europe can provide long-term stability and prosperity for the Western Balkan region. He recalled that the Commission adopted an economic and investment plan¹⁷ that brought approximately thirty million Euros to the region, which corresponds to the third of the region's global GDP. He mentioned concrete examples through which the Commission helped the region advance toward integration, including economic, political, and social policies. The commissioner also underlined what the region must still accomplish to be allowed accession, emphasizing that the integration is a beneficial geopolitical investment for all parties. According to the commissioner, the Mini-Schengen initiative¹⁸ is of key importance for the integration of the region, and the Commission supports all ideas contributing to the realization of the four fundamental freedoms of the EU. However, the Commission requires that this initiative remains open to all who wish to join and that it combines all other reforms demanded by the EU. The commissioner hopes that further developments will take place during the French Presidency, as the continuation of the enlargement process is of key importance.

Jadranka Joksimović noted that Hungary and the V4 have always demonstrated their support for Western Balkan integration. The minister underlined that accession to the EU has no alternative. She regretted that some Member States are still incredulous about the enlargement policy, despite the officially adopted credible enlargement perspectives. As the von der Leyen Commission named the enlargement as a priority, the EU's credibility is at stake. According to the minister, it is not an enlargement fatigue that Serbia sees from the EU, but the deliberate cut of previous engagements. The strategic interest of enlargement must be clearly seen from both sides. The future of European nations is within the natural borders of the continent that include the Western Balkans. Serbia has taken all the necessary steps toward integration, and accepted that the EU has "changed the rules in the middle of the game" with the new accession methodology. For this, Serbia even modifies its constitution on which Serbians voted on January 16, 2022.¹⁹ The minister thanked Hungary for its support. She spoke highly of the quality of Hungarian–Serbian relations and of the Hungarian help provided for Serbian integration. In response to a question from the audience, she underlined that the Open Balkan initiative came from the region itself and not from the EU or a Member State. Its goal is to create another platform to strengthen mutual trust.

Andor Deli regretted that enlargement has slowed down. He underlined that the region shares with us not only the continent, but also cultural and historical roots. He focused on the nature of enlargement, which has shifted from a highly political question

17 An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, COM(2020) 641 final, see: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

18 The initiative for regional cooperation "Mini Schengen" includes Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia; and was renamed on July 29, 2021 as "Open-Balkan."

19 Serbian citizens voted to change the country's constitution and accept a judicial reform package, with 60.48 percent voters saying "Yes" to the proposals in a referendum held on January 16, 2022.

to an administrative one. This is a mistake, and we must return to the true nature of the enlargement process. European leaders cannot avoid responsibility with the excuse of an overly administrative accession process. The EU must become stronger, for which the enlargement would be an appropriate instrument. From his point of view, Western countries are becoming uninspired by the region, while China has recognized the business opportunities in the Balkans. He also highlighted that parallel initiatives like the Berlin Process or the Open Balkan are useful, as they are stepping stones toward integration.

Gašper Dovžan highlighted the question of the EU's credibility, as it did not deliver on its promises. He finds useful every initiative that the Commission launched to advance the integration. He believes that these initiatives must be reinforced. He regretted that the EU has become too inward-looking, and the enlargement is off the agenda as soon as a crisis arises. This is an error because enlargement should be treated as a strategic choice. The Conference on the Future of Europe offers an opportunity for the first time to debate in a conference's framework. The Slovenian Presidency has achieved two major wins related to the conference: the digital platform is not geo-blocked, and, therefore, people from the Western Balkans can also post content; and the ministers of the region were invited to the Conference's Plenary of October²⁰ as key stakeholders. In his opinion, one of the biggest dangers of the debate is the tendency to separate European democracy from other levels of democracy. He noted that in the future, Europe must find a way to be more robust and resilient while maintaining internal flexibility.

The second panel of the international conference was opened by *László Trócsányi*, *Honorary President of the Ferenc Mádl Institute of Comparative Law*, who also participated as the moderator of the panel and presented the closing remarks. The panel also featured *Prof. Marjan I. Bojadžiev*, *Rector of the American College Skopje University*, *Dr. Arta Rama-Hajrizi*, *member of the Venice Commission and former President of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo*, *István Balogh*, *Deputy State Secretary for Security Policy and Political Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade*.

In his opening speech of the second panel of the conference, *László Trócsányi* identified a deeper understanding and definition of the Balkan region and the identification of the values with which the region can enrich European integration as the objectives of the discussion. The history of Europe and the Balkan region is intertwined, with many similarities and significant differences. After the change of regime, the Balkan region suffered a very serious crisis, which has now been consolidated and accession to the EU has become a real possibility for the countries of the region.

The opening speech provided a platform for a dialogue on the future of Europe, where experts shared and assessed their expectations and the expectations of their countries' public—differentiated by generations—on EU accession, shared their experiences of the EU from the perspective of candidate and pre-candidate countries, and spoke about the essence of the Balkan identity and the foreign policy to be pursued after accession (especially in relation to China, Russia, and Turkey).

20 On October 23, 2021, the second Conference Plenary meeting took place in the European Parliament in Strasbourg to discuss citizens' contributions to the Conference of the Future of Europe.

Prof. Marjan I. Bojadjiev started by stressing that the North Macedonia–Greece agreement is a diplomatic success of the highest importance. He went on to define the concept of the Western Balkans, which essentially came into being with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU and is a gaping hole in the map of Europe that prevents real unity. On the rule of law, he said that a clear illustration²¹ of the rule of law to the EU is needed and that both sides, the EU and Northern Macedonia, need to move. Northern Macedonia has already taken several steps in this respect, amending its constitution twice and reaching an international agreement in 2018 with the support of the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. It is now the turn of the Union, and although the Council President has promised to continue accession negotiations, the Bulgarian veto has interrupted the process. Addressing the Bulgarian ambassador present, he stressed the strong and long-lasting toxic effect of the Bulgarian veto on relations between the two countries and underlined the need to develop a political framework to address the situation.

Returning to the question of European integration, Bojadjiev raised the following questions: (i) Can integration be completed? (ii) Who is truly European; are the people of Western Balkans European? He likened Europe to a French cheese, which, in the absence of full integration of the Western Balkans, is full of holes and, thus, difficult to take seriously, and echoing MEP Kinga Gál's speech in Panel I, he pointed out that we are all deeply integrated in Europe, although in many different ways.

All the countries of the Western Balkans have signed pre-accession agreements;²² thus, from this point of view, they are part of the EU. He stressed that it is important to join Europe's economy, as the Western Balkans are small, open economies. He referred to a strongly problematic element for the people of the Western Balkans: when crossing the border, they have to use the gate used by Senegalese and Zambian citizens, and not the one used by European citizens. Referring to Commissioner *Olivér Várhelyi's* speech in Panel 1, he suggested that the EU should work toward the immediate integration of the Western Balkan region into the European Economic Community, which would require the amendment of Articles 95, 98, and 128 of the Agreement on the European Economic Area. He presented the results of a Vienna survey on the future of Europe, which looked at how many countries could join the EU by 2035. The study concluded that the current accession scenario puts business first, with only Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania joining the EU. The most vulnerable areas—Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina—would be left out. Therefore, the process is unlikely to be completed. Another result of the primacy of the business sector, based on the philosophy of “one economy, one region,” is the so-called Chamber of Commerce Investment Forum, in which all six Western Balkan countries are represented. The Forum has also launched the mini

21 He referred to the differences between Western and Eastern perspectives on the rule of law, as mentioned in the opening speech.

22 North Macedonia was the first state to sign the pre-accession agreement, before Croatia, which is now a member of the European Union, while not even negotiations have started with North Macedonia.

Schengen initiative (Skopje, Belgrade, and Tirana), which is now virtually passport-free, with all six Western Balkan countries expected to join soon. However, as soon as we look toward Belgrade, concrete practical difficulties immediately arise (long waiting times at the border, problems with goods transport and logistics, etc.), which the EU must find solutions to, since Mini Schengen should really be about freedoms and simplifying border controls.

The following question arises in this regard: Can the EU integrate the six Western Balkan countries while preparing them for EU accession? According to Bojadjiev, the European Economic Community is the best way to start integration. It is important that the six Western Balkan countries feel like active participants in the process. The enlargement of the European Economic Community is also a positive development for the Member States and can provide serious protection, especially for those EU countries that do not want to take in more immigrants. The ultimate issue is to maintain the EU's political influence in the region. In the Western Balkans, the EU has no official representation, while the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and China have a clear influence.

In conclusion, *Bojadjiev* said that integration and accession are processes that the region hopes to see completed, but uncertainty is causing the enthusiasm to wane. It should also be remembered that the EU is not only a stand-alone entity, a step on the Silk Road, but also part of Europe. Keeping the issue of integration on the agenda is essential.

Dr. Arta Rama-Hajrizi stated that integration is the goal of all Western Balkan countries, but this is being questioned by the attitude of the EU. To understand the accession process, she put the impact of the Western Balkans on European history in a historical context. Quoting Churchill, she explained that the Western Balkans have always been a Gordian knot for the European continent historically and although wars in the region have ended, peace remains fragile and the nations of the Western Balkans have not yet come to terms with the past. She stressed that overcoming the past requires national and European leaders; a vision of a larger, united, free, peaceful, and prosperous Europe based on trust; shared responsibility; and the vision of the founding fathers. However, to achieve all this, responsible action is needed, with the EU delivering on its promises, while the Western Balkan countries must also honor their commitments. Nevertheless, measures on the part of the EU have been inconsistent so far, particularly with regard to visa liberalization. Kosovo has fulfilled the 93 criteria²³ set by the Commission, including the most atypical criterion of resolving border issues, but a decision on visa liberalization has not been taken till date. She underlined that the lack of visa liberalization shows a lack of political will on the part of the EU, which in the eyes of the Kosovars calls into question the credibility of the EU—it has become clear that accession is a political process. She pointed out that the stagnation of the accession process and the lack of an EU strategy is leading to uncertainty and mutual blame in the Western Balkans. She

23 Kosovo 2020 report SWD(2020) 356 final, see: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/kosovo_report_2020.pdf [Accessed: 18 January 2022].

confirmed that the enlargement of the EU is hampered by several processes, such as the debates on migration, the internal reform of the EU, and the disputes between individual countries and the EU institutions. She also pointed out that the accession of the Western Balkans is one of the most crucial issues for the future of the EU. There would be no peace and security in the EU as long as the Western Balkans remained a black hole in the continent. The situation is exacerbated by the influence of China, Russia, and Turkey, which is reinforcing the division of the EU. All three countries are dominant international players, hampering the EU accession process. Turkey's presence is through investment, religious, and cultural ties, while China's influence is through various projects and investments that extend beyond the region. Regarding the importance of stability, her presentation referred to NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg's statement that some external factors are deliberately seeking to foment conflict between Bosnia and Kosovo. She stressed that because of their fragile economies and weak democracies, the Western Balkan countries could easily slip down the slippery slope of such conflicts, in which the lack of a clear position by the EU is a crucial factor.

She said that the Western Balkan countries do not expect the EU to take the Western Balkans on its shoulders and bring them into the EU. The EU must guide these countries along the path toward the realization of the European dream, because if it fails to do so, other countries will intervene with other means, which will instead lead to instability, disintegration, and conflict.

She stressed that the Republic of Kosovo continues to insist that the EU has no alternative despite the unfair and biased treatment by the EU. She also recalled that NATO and EU cooperation is necessary to continue the progress achieved so far, recognizing that the security of the region remains under threat.

She expressed hope that good neighborly relations between Serbia and Kosovo would be achieved with the help of the special envoys appointed by the United Kingdom, the United States, and the EU. The resolution of all these issues will make cooperation with the EU an achievable goal, but it will require concrete action on the part of the EU, not just reassuring words.

István Balogh presented theoretical and political arguments for the accession of the Western Balkan region to the EU, placing the issue of enlargement in the context of foreign policy. On Hungary's basic philosophy on enlargement, he stressed that the accession of the Western Balkans and the success of enlargement are closely linked to the future of Europe. Therefore, it is a priority for Hungary to develop an effective and successful enlargement policy. In outlining the key principles of the enlargement policy, he stressed the need for enlargement to be conducted as a successful political process. This has become essential, especially in the light of Brexit, and prevents enlargement from being interpreted as a bureaucratic process while maintaining the assessment of the candidate countries' preparedness. He set the dialogue with the candidate countries as a basic principle to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing the region. He also underlined the security policy importance of the Western Balkans for Europe, as the accession of the region is a cornerstone in the fight against illegal migration, and the

enlargement of the single internal market toward the South is also of economic importance. He also listed among the principles the acceleration of the accession process, which, if not achieved, risks losing the candidate countries' support for the EU. However, equally important are the promotion of infrastructure development and the stabilization of the Western Balkans region, which are also important for European security.

Another central issue of the speech centered on the political arguments for enlargement. In this respect, he underlined that if the enlargement policy fails, the EU will lose credibility, sending a negative message to the whole Western Balkan region and the international community. In his presentation, he pointed out that, in addition to the social and economic consequences of Brexit and COVID-19, several political debates are ongoing in the EU, which are reinforcing the division. In this context, a successful enlargement policy is of particular importance as a key element for long-term peace, security, and prosperity. He confirmed that the Western Balkans are a priority for Hungary, both in terms of security policy and COVID-19. The Western Balkans, as the main transit route for illegal migration, pose a major security challenge, and there were already examples of poor crisis management in the 1990s. In this context, adequate capacity building and effective border management in the region are particularly important, which indicates that failure to integrate these countries could lead to even more strategic challenges.

The third part of the presentation analyzed the social and economic aspects of enlargement. From the perspective of social impact, engaging young people from the Western Balkan region for the case of integration is of paramount importance, and is a key issue for a credible enlargement policy. From an economic perspective, the most important is the provision of rail and road access to the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea, which will also contribute to the economic growth of the region. Regarding the enlargement process, he reaffirmed that it remains merit-based, that is, based on preparedness and reforms implemented. However, the positive feedback from the EU confirming the reform efforts of the acceding countries, which in many cases is not forthcoming, is of paramount importance. The accession process is slowing down in Serbia and Montenegro, and accession negotiations have not even begun in the case of Northern Macedonia and Albania, underlining that the credibility of the EU depends on the candidate countries' accession in the near future. At this point, he pointed out that the EU countries have different views on enlargement, while confirming that Hungary is one of the pro-enlargement countries. In this context, he stressed that the realization of enlargement requires the development of political will and consensus, and the effective support of enlargement, while bearing in mind the interests of the Western Balkan countries and supporting their reform efforts.

He concluded his presentation by pointing out that without the political will for enlargement, the EU cannot act as a geopolitical factor, which makes it all the more necessary to proceed with enlargement as soon as possible.

At the end of Panel II, *Rama-Hajrizi* again stressed the importance of the integration of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, because Europe will never be complete without everyone; we do not know how long it will take, maybe fifty years for Kosovo,

but we need a clear path. This is the last moment for the Union to solve its own problems. *Bojadžiev* proposed the “Budapest Process” as a strategic initiative to help Western Balkan integration.

In his closing remarks, President László Trócsányi, reacting to the “Budapest Process,” recalled the “Szeged Process,” in which Hungary wanted to help the Western Balkan countries during the war.

Regarding the current situation, he referred to his lack of optimism, contrasting the position of the EU, which wants to achieve centralization, even by amending the Treaties, with the position promoting the principle of subsidiarity, which is represented by Hungary. He also expressed interest in the French Presidency’s vision for Europe, particularly regarding the position of the Western Balkans. He expressed his conviction that at the end of the Conference on the Future of Europe, the French presidency would want to amend the Treaties, which could lead to a new Europe, with the six founding countries at the heart of the EU, Hungary, and the other Member States in a second round, and the Western Balkans in a third round.

He stressed that equality between countries is a central element of EU integration for them, and that they reject any initiative that does not promote it. There are many possible scenarios, but the basic aim is to continue the work, articulate ambitions clearly, and maintain and build bilateral diplomatic relations. Finding a compromise is very important and can be a solution.

Conclusions

The high-level *European and Hungarian politicians* who spoke at the international conference came to the conclusion that the enlargement process should focus on global European strategic interests instead of being over-bureaucratic or slowed down by Member States that are uninspired by the enlargement, not seeing its economic and strategic benefits.

The speakers, almost without exception, highlighted the issues of credibility, political, economic, security, and strategic interests of the future of Europe in thinking about the future of the enlargement. Although some slight differences regarding their approach to specific issues related to the advancement of European integration of the Western Balkans exist, every participant stressed the importance and urgency of their accession. The Hungarian government’s stance consisting of a firm support to the EU accession of the Western Balkans based and justified on their merits and the accomplishment of the required criteria, especially with regard to Serbia, was reaffirmed.