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*The enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans: a forum
for reflection*

The agenda of the European Union in the last three years has been characterized by particular attention to the issue of enlargement to the Western Balkans, which has put an end to a long period of stalemate. With interested Countries (those that remained after the entry of Croatia and Slovenia into the Union, namely Serbia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro), negotiations were started at different times and processes of change were also launched, albeit with difficulty. There was no lack of resistance from some members of the Union (for example France, Holland, Denmark), which created a stalemate and without results at least until 2019. However, it was precisely the resistances put in place that pushed the Union to seek a different way of considering the issue of enlargement, also looking at the political evolution that was affecting the western Balkan area. In this area, while the will of the Countries interested in joining the European Union grew, there was at the same time the active presence of other non-Union countries (Turkey and Russia), which recalling ancient

relationships have sought (and continue to seek) stable involvement with economic and cultural interventions. For this reason, a different EU approach to the issue of enlargement was necessary, making it possible to re-evaluate the geopolitical aspect and to resize the bureaucratic one, especially for Albania and North Macedonia, with which during the long process of rapprochement they could encounter significant progress has been made regarding the observance (substantially and also formally, albeit to a lesser extent) of the three major criteria (economic, political, accession to the *acquis communautaire*) in the light of which "transform" the condition of the candidate Country.

In this change, Italy has also played an important role in giving relevance to the political perspective, which is the first founding value of the Union. It should not be forgotten that the political perspective led to the enlargement to the Countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of the bipolar system. The "debate" that between 2019 and 2020 involved the European Council and the European Commission, respecting each other's roles, outlined a new profile of the enlargement process, which can be read in the document that on 1 July 2020 the Commission submitted to the Council, which became operational. We want to underline that the desire to innovate the criteria of the negotiations (which concern the principles, the contents and the procedures) highlight the value of the political options: enlarging the Union (entry into the Union looking on the the side of the candidate Countries) is a political act, accompanied by specific steps, the assumption of different responsibilities, the involvement of different institutional subjects (also

thanks to the intergovernmental conferences) and the interest of civil society. In this perspective, the political role of the European Union must be understood, albeit with great difficulty. It is called to carry out a geopolitical action, whose valuable contents are legal, economic, philosophical: the Union must be the bearer of a vision of life that protects the dignity of the human person and the values that characterize the rule of law. The assumption of this political role, also imposed by historical events, resizes the bureaucratic processes: it is a challenge for the Union posed precisely by the request for new members, starting with those of the Western Balkans.

The new structure of international relations, the temporary slowdown in the dynamics of globalization, the evolution of trade dynamics, the growing violation of human rights, the repressions of religious freedom, the critical issues regarding international security, the growth of migratory flows, etc., these are events that require awareness of the importance of playing a political role, all the more effective and convincing if this role constitutes the expression of a unity, of a "union". Moreover, the dramatic war started by Russia against Ukraine - an event that goes beyond the boundaries of territorial claims, and which in some way constitutes the continuation of the wars that are fought at various levels and intensities in the Mediterranean and in sub-Saharan Africa (from East Africa to West Africa) - demonstrates the importance of belonging to the European Union (something other States like Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine itself aspire to) and the need for the Union to address political challenges by strengthening its political unity and action.

The Russo-Ukrainian war that began in February 2022 distorts the criteria for defining conflicts, established by the UN statute and in various international treaties, and claims to rewrite the system of borders and international relations with military force.

In this tragic perspective, the effects of this war are also felt in the Western Balkans, affecting in particular directly Serbia and Bosnia and indirectly Kosovo and North Macedonia. For this reason, the enlargement policy takes on an urgent nature also to respond to the growing awareness of the interested Balkan Countries (both those candidates and those aspiring to be candidates) which between 2020 and 2021 have put in place a series of institutional meetings and summits, precisely in the direction of the path innovations approved by the Commission and the Council of Europe. Among the most relevant steps we can mention the following: the informal Brussels summit of 16 February 2020 between the President of the EU Commission, the President of the European Council and the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia; the EU-Western Balkans summit held on 6 May 2020 by videoconference due to the Covid-19 pandemic; the summit in Slovenia in Brdo in October 2021 between EU leaders and Balkan leaders, to strengthen the European prospects of the countries of the region and their accession process with the indication of concrete initiatives aimed at relaunching the region. This latest summit, held during Slovenia's presidency of the Union, was of particular interest due to the prospects for opening the final document and the Slovenian presidency's proposal

to transform the meeting into a regular appointment annually in order to speed up the enlargement process. Although the concrete results of the various summits are not particularly relevant, their importance in terms of political governance should not be underestimated regarding the significance of enlargement and the geopolitical role of the Union.

Thus, the enlargement process becomes the instrument (political, legal, economic) and the method for building the mission of the EU, as an international political Entity engaged in peaceful, prosperous and secure relations between different European peoples (between their cultures, religions, traditions) and to support not only their progress but also the progress of other peoples of other Countries, in a perspective of peace. It is precisely the voice of peoples affected by social and economic crises and by current wars (there are over 60 wars between large and small wars in the world), and especially the voice of the Ukrainian people, requires a decisive response of a different sign from the European Union. Convinced of the importance of the enlargement process to the Western Balkans in the direction indicated, with this issue the Review opens a forum for reflection reserved for essays, testimonies, proposals, which will also be curated in the next issues.