



Conference of The Bridge Forum Dialogue,

Tuesday 23 April 2024

Luxembourg, Auditorium Cité

**The European Union and the Western Balkans.
Enlargement: ambitions versus realities?**

Introduction

By Etienne de Lhoneux, Chairman of the Executive Committee of The Bridge Forum Dialogue

Altesses Royales,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends of The Bridge Forum Dialogue,

It's a pleasure to welcome all of you, presential and virtual participants, interested by a very sensitive subject.

This subject was on the list of our planned conferences since many years.

Unfortunately, every year, we had to postpone it because of insufficient progress in this matter. A new enlargement did not appear as a priority; the difficulties and hesitations seemed prohibitive.

Things have changed dramatically now.

Just after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, two years ago, we organised a conference on the future of our Union. There was a strong support for the views expressed, considering that our Union was unprepared to react to the new challenges.



The sentiment was and still is, that we need transforming our Union, which started as a Market Union, comforted by an Economic and Monetary Union, into what should become a genuine Peace Making Union, ensuring the protection of its citizens but also of its friends and neighbours.

This is why restarting the enlargement process appears as an essential part of the progresses to be undertaken.

In this context, the Western Balkans deserve a priority.

Now, we have to enhance the EU cooperation with the Western Balkans Countries, while we expect also a better cooperation between these countries themselves

This conference is based on two legs, the EU, on the one side, the Western Balkans, on the other.

For the EU, the problem is not only to check the level of preparation of the candidates; we have also to ensure that the EU itself is ready by making some basic changes in its modus operandi.

Of course, a future Union with 35 Member States will put us in a situation very different from our original Common Market and bring us closer to the situation of the USA.

The EU Governance has to be improved. For instance, the unanimity rule in the fields of external policy or of own EU resources, appears outdated; it has to be replaced by more accountability vis-à-vis the EU Parliament.

We need more efficient EU policies, internally and externally. There is a long way to go

Too often, the legitimate ambitions are blocked by what is perceived as unsurmountable realities.

This is reflected in the question mark of the title of our conference. What should prevail: ambitions or difficulties?



We know how complex is the situation in the Balkans.

These beautiful and charming countries, have since long been ravaged by violence, especially following the collapse of former Yugoslavia, in a context of geopolitical tensions, aggravated by powerful conflicting external interests.

The adhesion of two Western Balkans countries to the EU was successful; they take part now to the monetary Union. Nevertheless, the step-by-step approach, country by country, has its limits. We need global agreements, including for instance Serbia and Kosovo, especially now that we are entering into discussions with Ukraine and other candidate countries.

To address such delicate issues, we could not have a better speaker than Mr Stefan Füle. Thank you very much, Mr. Füle, for having kindly accepted our invitation

You have an impressive experience.

You served as a member of the Czech Government, as an Ambassador to various countries and international organisations; you have been EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy for five years; you are presently Chairman of the European Policy Centre Task Force on Enlargement.

Please, Mr Füle, the floor is yours.