ENLARGEMENT PULSE COLLOQUIUM 2026

"Enlargement Transformation: Civic Engagement, Competitiveness and Strategic Investment in the Western Balkans"

Second edition | College of Europe, Tirana Campus (Aula Magna Auditorium, Godina Liria) | 11 November 2026

A partnership of the College of Europe - Tirana Campus, the CSF Foundation, the International Banks Division of Intesa Sanpaolo Group and the College of Europe Alumni Association.

Building on the success of its inaugural edition in Tirana on 21 November 2025, the 2026 Enlargement Pulse Colloquium will examine EU enlargement through the lens of the Western Balkans, focusing on the region's ongoing political and economic transformation and on the institutional adaptations required—both within candidate countries and across the European Union—to prepare for a future expanded membership. With a sharper focus on the interplay between political and economic transformation in candidate countries, the 2026 Colloquium aims to offer an open platform for taking the pulse of enlargement through exchanges among decision makers, policy experts, civil society representatives but also private-sector leaders.

In a Western Balkans context, enlargement should be understood not only as a process of regional transformation, but as a central geoeconomic project for Europe. At a time of intense global competition, the progressive integration of the Western Balkans can help the EU remain a dynamic, resilient and competitive economic actor by expanding its economic space, strengthening value chains and connectivity, and mobilising new sources of talent, investment and growth. Among other priorities, this requires identifying strategic infrastructure, resources, industrial capabilities and financial networks in accession countries, and developing EU-Western Balkan approaches to safeguard and leverage them even before full membership is attained, including against undue influence of other extra-regional actors.

The endpoint shall remain political transformation: candidate countries able to function and deliver as pluralistic market-economy democracies, anchored in the rule of law, accountable institutions and fair competition. Enlargement will retain public credibility only when its benefits become tangible to citizens - through better jobs, public services, opportunities, rights and trust in institutions - and when reform means a real break with corruption, cronyism and state capture. Recent civic mobilisations across the region underscore the demand for genuine economic change and meaningful democratic participation.

Civil society is indispensable to this process and should be understood broadly to include civic organisations, universities, youth, media, but also businesses and private sector actors. Private-sector institutions can contribute translating alignment with EU rules into actual investment, innovation, and employment outcomes. For their part, banks and international financial institutions can connect reforms to capital, support SMEs and strategic projects, helping establish sound interaction between national public authorities and private finance.

While the formal accession criteria remain the necessary benchmark, future institutional arrangements will require flexibility and creativity. The EU will need internal reforms to remain effective with additional members, while intermediate arrangements should build credible bridges to full membership - through gradual access to the Single Market, dedicated funding, investment support, sectoral integration and other forms of participation - without diluting conditionality or creating a permanent substitute for membership.

Objectives

- Assess progress, setbacks and next steps in the 2026 enlargement process following the European Commission's annual country reports.
- Connect political reform, public support and economic transformation, with citizens' lived experience as the benchmark of credibility.

- Explore institutional bridges to membership and identify strategic assets that Europe and the Western Balkans should jointly protect and develop.
- Anticipate upcoming crossroads and decision points and clarify how civil society, businesses, banks and financial institutions can help sustain enlargement momentum and translate it into tangible political and economic transformation.

Format

The event will combine a kick-off intervention, a keynote address, three moderated panels, short students' reflections on the future of EU enlargement and priority reforms, and closing remarks. It will see the active participation of College of Europe faculty and students, University of Tirana professors and students, the local and regional diplomatic community, as well as relevant civil society and private sector representatives. A reasoned analysis of the discussion may be developed after the event and published as a CSF Foundation Policy Paper, translating the Colloquium's findings into policy-oriented recommendations.

Draft agenda

	SESSION
09:00-09:15	**OPENING – INTRODUCTORY REMARKS** João Gomes Cravinho, Rector of the College of Europe, Kick-off intervention setting out the Colloquium's ambition as an annual Tirana-based platform on enlargement and European transformation. Paola Papanicolaou, Chief of the International Banks Division, Intesa Sanpaolo Group. Introductory remarks on the geoeconomics of enlargement - investment, competitiveness and financial integration in the Western Balkans.
09:15-09:30	**KEYNOTE ADDRESS** Sofia Moreira de Sousa, Head of the EU Delegation to Albania
09:30-10:45	**PANEL I - TAKING THE PULSE: CAN THE NEW ENLARGEMENT MOMENTUM DELIVER?** *Progress, setbacks, open questions and next steps, including reactions to the European Commission's 2026 Enlargement Package and the implications of differentiated progress across the Western Balkans.* Ferit Hoxha, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania (TBC) Marco Alberti, Ambassador of Italy to Albania Odeta Barbullushi, Resident Professor, College of Europe in Tirana Jelena Džankić, Head of Widening Europe Programme, EUI (TBC) Moderator: Emiliano Alessandri, CSF Foundation.
10:45-11:00	**COFFEE BREAK**
11:00-12:15	**PANEL II - TRANSFORMATION CITIZENS CAN SEE: DEMOCRACY, COMPETITIVENESS AND PUBLIC SUPPORT** *How do institutional reforms and economic convergence translate into citizens' lived experience? What is the relationship between rule of law, fair competition, economic opportunity, trust and public support for enlargement? The discussion will explore when EU integration becomes credible enough for citizens to see tangible improvements in jobs, services, rights and opportunities, and a future at home.* Jovana Marović, Former Deputy Prime Minister and European Affairs Minister of Montenegro, BiEPAG member (TBC)

	Adnan Ćerimagić, Senior Analyst, European Stability Initiative (TBC) Vedran Džihić, Senior Researcher, OIIP (TBC) Igor Vidačak, Director of Studies, College of Europe in Tirana/University of Zagreb Moderator: Teona Lavrelashvili, College of Europe Alumni Association/ Martens Centre for European Studies.
12:15-13:15	**PANEL III - INVESTING IN ENLARGEMENT: MOBILISING CAPITAL FOR EUROPEAN INTEGRATION** *The role of companies, banks and financial institutions in sustaining accession: financing SMEs and strategic infrastructure; supporting green, digital and industrial transformation; improving standards and governance; mobilising cross-border investment; and protecting strategic assets while anchoring them in the European economic space.* Alessandro de Concini, Head of EIB Office in Albania Valbona Zaneli, Atlantic Council (TBC) Milica Delević, EBRD (TBC) Gentian Elezi, Resident Professor, College of Europe in Tirana Moderator: Mr. Renato Vichi, Head of Institutional Affairs and External Communications, International Banks at Intesa Sanpaolo
13:15 -13:30	**NEXT GENERATION PULSE – WHAT SHOULD CHANGE BY 2027?** *College of Europe and University of Tirana students identify one priority reform or policy change that should be achieved before the 2027 Enlargement Package (four students maximum, each with around two minutes. One reform, one argument, one expected result).*
13:30-13:45	**CLOSING REMARKS - ENLARGEMENT PULSE 2026 – KEY TAKEAWAYS AND PRIORITIES FOR 2027** Nicolò Russo Perez, CSF Foundation - key conclusions and possible directions for the post-event CSF Foundation Policy Paper.
13:45	**NETWORKING LUNCH**