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Cooperation, Enlargement and Dialogue with Central and Eastern Europe: The CEI Executive Secretariat Turns Thirty. Interview with Secretary General Franco Dal Mas

Rocco Forcellino | Eastwest | 6 November 2026

What if we told you that there is an international organisation conceived by Italy which today brings together 17 countries and is one of the main instruments of Italian foreign policy cooperation in the Danube-Balkan region? It receives little attention, yet the Central European Initiative (CEI), which for almost four decades has embodied the desire of Central and Eastern European countries to draw closer through multiple forms of cooperation, is a source of pride for Italian diplomacy. It works tirelessly to promote enlargement, European integration and the "reunification" of Europe. Based in Trieste, it is headed by an Italian, former senator and lawyer Franco Dal Mas, whom we had the pleasure of interviewing.

Secretary General, on 29 October, a policy paper prepared by the Istituto Affari Internazionali to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the Executive Secretariat of the Central European Initiative was presented at the Italian Senate in Rome. It was an opportunity to reflect on the organisation's history and its role in the European context. What is the history of the CEI?

The CEI was born of an idea put forward by the then Italian Foreign Minister, Gianni De Michelis, who, together with his Austrian, Hungarian and Yugoslav counterparts, met in Budapest just two days after the fall of the Berlin Wall with a stated objective: to foster integration in order to prevent disintegration, in a world that was falling apart. This four-country agreement, known as the "Quadrangular", brought together Italy, firmly anchored in Euro-Atlantic relations; a neutral country, Austria; a non-aligned country, Yugoslavia; and Hungary, which was still under the influence of the Soviet Union. De Michelis's vision worked because it captured a shared sense that the world was passing through a historic turning point and that a framework for moving forward and a destination were needed, with a view to strengthening the European Community.

Is it a coincidence that Italy plays a leading role in this story?

Italy is historically and geographically situated in the Mediterranean. It connects the two shores of the Adriatic and has deep historical ties with the Balkans and the Danube region, not to mention the legacy of the Venetian Republic. It is no coincidence that Trieste was chosen as the seat of our Executive Secretariat through an international agreement in 1996. Italy has always honoured its historical responsibilities in this part of Europe and demonstrated its willingness to build bridges eastwards. Today, this commitment finds firm support in the work of Minister Tajani, who has promoted regular ministerial meetings of the Friends of the Western Balkans Group to accelerate the

EU accession of CEI candidate countries. We could rightly describe this as another strategic insight in keeping with Italy's political tradition.

How has the CEI evolved over these thirty years, and what are the main challenges it faces today?

From four countries, the CEI has grown to 17 members today: it encompasses much of the Balkans, reaches the Baltic through Poland, and extends to the Black Sea and Ukraine. The Initiative has evolved considerably, both institutionally and operationally. Today it brings together parliamentarians and diplomats from all its countries who, together with the Secretariat, define its operational priorities. Beyond diplomatic dialogue, we have financial instruments at our disposal and work through bottom-up processes to support businesses, civil society, institutions and projects. Much remains to be done. Of the 16 active members, seven are still outside the EU, and all have candidate status. Gaps persist between CEI countries and the EU average in areas such as infrastructure, energy resilience, digitalisation and institutional stability. Our aim is to use our instruments to help close these gaps, both within and outside the EU.

What are these instruments?

In the economic dimension, the main instrument is the CEI Fund at the EBRD, established by Italy in 1992 and financed entirely by Rome. It supports Technical Cooperation through feasibility studies and capacity building ahead of EBRD investments, as well as the Know-how Exchange Programme, which connects EU and non-EU institutions to promote reforms and alignment with European standards. Alongside it is the Cooperation Fund, established in 2001 and financed by the 16 active Member States, which regularly funds workshops, seminars and training activities, demonstrating a sense of shared ownership. The Secretariat in Trieste is also a genuine hub for managing EU-funded projects, through which we address transnational challenges such as maritime security, sustainable mobility and the circular bioeconomy. Bringing CEI countries closer to Europe also means strengthening the rule of law, institutional stability and democratic resilience. Initiatives such as the Falcone-Borsellino Programme aim to share with CEI countries Italy's proven expertise in combating organised crime and corruption.

What role can businesses play in the CEI's mission?

From the outset, the CEI has recognised that regional cooperation cannot be the exclusive preserve of governments. That is why the business community is an integral part of our multi-stakeholder approach. This is demonstrated by the Economic Forum, organised in cooperation with chambers of commerce and other economic stakeholders, which provides an established space for public-private dialogue on economic cooperation, regional integration, connectivity and sustainable development. It is also demonstrated by "Youth in Business", the programme implemented with the CEI Fund at the EBRD to support youth entrepreneurship, alongside our work on SMEs, digital transformation and the circular economy. In this context, Italian businesses can be natural partners of the Initiative: they know these regions and operate in sectors we consider strategic, from transport corridors to energy, water and digitalisation, all the way to Ukraine's reconstruction. They can bring experience, investment and expertise to areas where our project preparation work opens up new opportunities. Strengthening this link with the private sector is one of the most promising directions for the next phase, and the Secretariat is ready to play its part by guiding businesses towards the appropriate channels.

Ukraine has been a member of the CEI for thirty years. What impact has the return of war had on the organisation, and how has the CEI responded?

Russia's invasion on 24 February 2022 prompted unanimous condemnation by the Member States. The CEI is strongly committed to supporting Ukraine with the means at our disposal. We did so first through humanitarian instruments and then through our financial leverage. I would mention the Ternopil project for trolleybus transport and the project supported by the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region, which will deliver new generators to Kyiv in the coming days.

Moreover, since the beginning of my mandate, I have chosen to complete the CEI's institutional structure by appointing two new Deputy Secretaries General and reconfirming a third, all high-ranking diplomats. Today, one is Ukrainian, one is Hungarian and one is Serbian. This is the strategy of cohesion that the CEI wants to bring to Europe. Underpinning it is the idea that Eastern Europe is not something separate, but part of a common journey towards the reunification of Europe. I would also point out that Ukraine will assume the rotating CEI Presidency in 2027, together with the associated responsibility for providing political leadership to this forum.

In short, the CEI's mission is not only operational; it also embodies a vision of Europe. Do you believe that the reunification of Europe depends on renewed confidence in the "European way of life"?

Here at the CEI, we believe it is essential to observe the world in which we live. To quote political scientist Mark Leonard, we find ourselves in a state of permanent instability, of "non-peace". In the international context, there is a world organising itself differently from us. Some, such as Russia, declare that they recognise democracy as a value and an institutional system, but exclude its liberal component, sacrificing the separation of powers and civil rights. Others, in different parts of the world, succumb to the temptation to believe that, in a competitive world, monopolies must be established in order to survive.

We must offer an alternative to all this, rooted in the founding values of the European Union, the thinking of its founding fathers, free competition and the rule of law. The capacity of this model to expand and thus to "reunify" the European space is certainly an indicator of confidence and renewed hope. Through political dialogue and regional cooperation, the CEI will continue to press ahead to achieve this goal.

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