

Original scientific paper

NORTH MACEDONIA IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: BETWEEN REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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Abstract

The main subject of the study is the position of North Macedonia within the European Union (EU) enlargement framework and the geopolitical configuration of the Western Balkans, conceptualised not as a geographic entity but as a political category defined by non-membership. Although designated a candidate state in 2005 and formally approved for accession negotiations in 2020, North Macedonia remains the most protracted accession case in the region. The Western Balkans, initially incorporated into the EU enlargement agenda through the Stabilisation and Association Process, remain institutionally framed as a transitional space expected to converge with the Union. While the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit affirmed the region's membership perspective, post-Thessaloniki developments were marked by procedural revision, enlargement fatigue, and (geo)political recalibration. Comparative analysis of the Commission's 2025 reports confirm that North Macedonia is not substantially lagging in *acquis* alignment relative to Albania and other WB6 countries, but remains constrained by unresolved identity-based conditions.

Keywords: Western Balkans; European Union enlargement; North Macedonia; Prespa Agreement; candidate status; constitutional amendments

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INTRODUCTION

In 2025, North Macedonia marks twenty years since obtaining candidate status for membership in the European Union – a milestone that coincides with earlier projections in which Serbia and Montenegro were expected to attain full membership in the same year. Although accession negotiations for North Macedonia formally began in 2022 following the adoption of the French proposal, the country remains in a state of integration suspension. When candidate status was initially granted, North Macedonia was widely recognised as the regional frontrunner, even ahead of Croatia, which became a full EU member in 2013. Today, however, the state is increasingly referenced as the most protracted accession case in the Western Balkans, replacing earlier narratives that centred on Turkey's extended negotiation timeline.

The progression from initial optimism to prolonged stagnation has been determined by external conditionality mechanisms. The first blockade, arising from the name dispute with Greece, prevented advancement for nearly two decades and was formally resolved through the Prespa Agreement, ratified in 2019. Subsequently, identity-linked conditionality re-emerged in the form of the Bulgarian blockade, again constraining the accession trajectory. In 2024, the informal integration pairing of North Macedonia and

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Albania was formally decoupled, and by the end of 2025 Albania had opened all negotiation clusters under the new, revised methodology. This development reinforced perceptions of North Macedonia as the most delayed candidate state and intensified a regional “exclusion effect,” particularly in view of the geopolitical implications of Albania potentially acceding before North Macedonia.

This paper examines the conceptual foundations and political function of the Western Balkans as a category defined by its relationship to the European integration process: the subset of Balkan states not yet institutionally incorporated into the European Union. Within this framing, North Macedonia is analysed as the central symbolic case of enlargement stagnation: its extended accession halt has strengthened inward regional cooperation dynamics, most notably within the Open Balkan (Mini-Schengen) format initiated with Serbia and Albania. Furthermore, the paper evaluates North Macedonia’s alignment with *acquis*-related obligations in comparison with the other Western Balkans states, situating the country’s trajectory within broader debates on the credibility, consistency, and long-term sustainability of EU enlargement conditionality.

1. WESTERN BALKANS: THE MAGNIFICENT SIX

The term “Balkans” is not merely territorial but functions as a cultural and political construct, historically associated with instability, conflict, and civilizational backwardness (Koliopoulos, 2002). In this sense, the Balkans came to signify “Europe’s Other,” positioned between the “civilized” West and the “barbaric” East and characterized as “quasi-European” or “quasi-Oriental” (Todorova, 1997; Šarić, 2004).

This external stigmatization has been partially internalized and partially rejected within the region. Slovenia and Romania, for instance, reject the Balkan label to avoid associations with instability and instead claim “Central European” identity (Kriještorac, 2018). Yugoslavia similarly resisted identification with both the Balkans and Eastern Europe, asserting its distinct geopolitical orientation (Šarić, 2004). In the post-Cold War context, identification has increasingly followed European Union membership, such that countries not fully integrated into the EU are those implicitly designated as genuinely Balkan, regardless of geography. The geopolitical term “Western Balkans,” introduced by the EU in the early 2000s, institutionalized this symbolic hierarchy. The term referred to countries in southeastern Europe that were not EU members or candidates but could aspire to join (Dabrowski & Myachenkova, 2018; Vukasović, 2018). It replaced the broader designation “South Eastern Europe,” which had included Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia (Spasov, 2024). In this regard, the Balkans ceased to denote a geographical territory and assumed a metaphorical meaning (Vukasović, 2018).

Following the accession of Central and Eastern European states, the Western Balkans formed an enclave within EU territory, reinforcing assumptions of eventual integration (Lehne, 2020). The designation included all Yugoslav successor states except Slovenia, and added Albania (Kolstø, 2016). The term was introduced within EU institutional language to differentiate non-member states on the basis of membership status, which became the sole categorical criterion. Initially composed of seven states, the group no longer includes Croatia following its 2013 accession (Dabrowski & Myachenkova, 2018). In EU discourse, the Western Balkans continue to be framed as a space not fully European but positioned for integration, defined as

transitional and potentially incorporable into the European mainstream of stability, progress, and prosperity (Belloni, 2009). Despite political transformation and formal association with European frameworks, the region continues to be associated with war legacies, instability, corruption, and underdeveloped democratic practices (Nezirović et al. 2021). Nonetheless, Western Balkan elites have continued alignment with Western-led liberal globalization, despite the perception of prolonged transitional status (Vangeli, 2021).

2. EUROPE'S ENGAGEMENT: REASON TO BE

The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), launched in 1999, established the foundational framework for the European Union's engagement with the Western Balkans, combining a regional approach with individually negotiated Stabilisation and Association Agreements (Ross Smith et al., 2020). On this basis, the Western Balkans were incorporated into the EU enlargement process in 2000 (Vukasović, 2018). The 2003 Thessaloniki Summit confirmed the European perspective of the region, formally stating that “the future of the Balkans is in the European Union” (Panagiotou, 2020; Lehne, 2020; Belloni, 2009), and this position was reaffirmed at the Sofia Summit in 2018 (Bauerová, 2022), and on almost every similar occasion onward.

Despite early commitments, the post-Thessaloniki period has been marked by slow progress in accession and repeated procedural recalibration (Herceg Kolman & Bandov, 2022). Initial support for EU integration in the Western Balkans was high, and party systems largely aligned with the accession agenda (Damjanovski et al., 2020; Stratulat, 2014; Stojić, 2017), but stagnation in negotiations and limited reform outcomes contributed to a gradual rise in Euroscepticism (Damjanovski et al., 2020). Variation in advancement remains pronounced, as states occupy different stages of accession (Spasov, 2024), and the European Commission's 2018 indication of 2025 as a possible accession date for Serbia and Montenegro reflected this differentiated progress (Dabrowski & Myachenkova, 2018).

Repeated revision of enlargement procedures has been a defining feature of post-Thessaloniki integration. The 2020 enlargement methodology represented the fourth formal adjustment to accession rules (Tilev, 2020), introducing additional emphasis on credibility, predictability, and political steering, with specific focus on rule of law, governance, and administrative reform (Korpalo & Rabinovych, 2025). These changes sought to address persistent implementation gaps and conditionality fatigue but did not eliminate structural barriers related to administrative capacity and democratic performance across the region (Damjanovski et al., 2020).

The Berlin Process was introduced to sustain engagement and reinforce cooperation, reconciliation, and connectivity (Džananović et al., 2021; Marciacq, 2017), functioning as a supplementary instrument rather than a replacement for accession (Lange, 2016; Marciacq, 2017). While additional regional initiatives such as Open Balkan emerged, the Berlin Process remained the principal supportive framework (Marku & Allushi Teqja, 2024).

Developments after 2020 further altered enlargement conditions. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted intensified EU diplomatic attention on the Western Balkans due to their strategic and security relevance (Christidis, 2024). At the same time, enlargement discussions moved away from a strictly merit-based sequencing toward more openly geopolitical considerations (Couteau et al., 2024), reflected in the

granting of candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and subsequent procedural advancement for North Macedonia and Albania.

Following Croatia's accession, no new members were admitted for a decade, and membership conditionality intensified (Karjalainen, 2023). The EU's focus on the war in Ukraine and associated sanctions has reduced attention to accession-driven reform and diminished incentives for political elites (Jelesijević, 2024). At the 2023 Bled Strategic Forum, 2030 was presented as a possible readiness horizon for both sides, indicating political signaling rather than a binding timeline (Spasov, 2024).

While enlargement remains integral to EU integration, absorption capacity continues to operate as an internal constraint distinct from conditionality, which applies externally to candidate states (Schwarz, 2016). Despite extensive engagement, accession progress continues to be slow and frequently stalled (Németh, 2022). Key impediments include unresolved bilateral disputes, democratic backsliding, and tendencies toward state capture (Németh, 2022). Supplementary frameworks such as the Berlin Process continue to sustain reform expectations (Lange, 2016), yet overall stagnation reflects limited prioritization and uneven commitment at both EU and domestic levels (Jelesijević, 2024; Spasov, 2024).

3. NORTH MACEDONIA: AN EXAMPLE (TO FOLLOW)

In autumn 2024, Albania opened the first cluster of accession negotiations, becoming practically decoupled from North Macedonia despite the absence of a formal pairing mechanism, as accession is officially merit-based (Spasov, 2024). This outcome reinforced perceptions of differentiated advancement and heightened political sensitivity in North Macedonia.

North Macedonia has held candidate status since 2005 and received its first recommendation to open negotiations in 2009, yet the process remained blocked for more than a decade due to the naming dispute with Greece. The Prespa Agreement resolved the constitutional name issue and its broader symbolic implications. Public resistance to the name change was high, and the consultative referendum did not reach the necessary turnout, despite international appeals framing the vote as decisive for the country's Euro-Atlantic trajectory (Bozhinovski, 2019). Following Prespa, North Macedonia acceded to NATO, in line with prior expectations. However, anticipated progress toward EU accession was delayed by the revised enlargement methodology in 2019. In March 2020, the Council endorsed the opening of accession negotiations, but without specifying the date of the first intergovernmental conference (Ristevska-Jordanova & Kacarska, 2020).

Later in 2020, Bulgaria blocked the progress, citing non-implementation of commitments deriving from the 2017 Treaty of Friendship and its 2019 framework position (Christidis, 2019) with a dispute that extends beyond bilateral political relations to matters of historical interpretation, language, and identity.

The French proposal conditioned North Macedonia's progression on the needed constitutional amendments, and the document of the first intergovernmental conference reiterated that accession proceeds when criteria are met, in line with earlier statements that negotiations are based on merit rather than compassion (Müftüler-Bac, 2002; Alexandrescu, 2020).

Geopolitical shifts following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the rapid NATO accession of Finland and Sweden partially moderated perceptions that the post-Prespa concessions gave limited benefit. However, the French proposal does not constitute a second "Prespa moment." Bulgarian demands on historiography challenge core aspects of North Macedonia's identity narrative, making compromise contingent on sustained political commitment (Christidis, 2019). The Macedonian government remains reluctant to advance constitutional amendments in the absence of credible EU assurances (Couteau et al., 2024).

However, the EU provides neither assurances nor incentives, aside from the procedural decoupling of North Macedonia from Albania. This contributes to heightened perceptions of exclusion, particularly within the Albanian political bloc in North Macedonia, which emphasizes the costs of prolonged blockades on integration despite the disputes not originating in interethnic dynamics (Pendarovski, 2012).

4. WB6: TOGETHER AS (N)ONE

The Western Balkan states occupy different stages of accession (Spasov, 2024), a divergence which does not stem from distinct initial aspirations toward EU membership. North Macedonia obtained candidate status in December 2005, with accession negotiations formally starting on 19 July 2022. Montenegro became a candidate on 17 December 2010 and opened negotiations on 29 June 2012. Serbia was granted candidate status on 1 March 2012, followed by the launch of negotiations at the first Intergovernmental Conference on 21 January 2014. Albania received candidate status on 24 June 2014, opening accession negotiations on 19 July 2022. Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status on 15 December 2022, while Kosovo remains the sole potential candidate in the region, as it has not yet been awarded formal candidate status (Eurostat, n.d.). Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania now share the same procedural position in the accession framework, as all negotiation clusters have been opened. Their trajectories, however, differ with respect to chapter closure, conditionality performance, and political feasibility. Serbia has provisionally closed several chapters, yet its overall progress is defined less by *acquis* alignment and more by the political conditionality embedded in Chapter 35 on relations with Kosovo, which effectively conditions further closure. Montenegro remains the most advanced in terms of closure, having opened all chapters early (2012–2018) and secured relatively durable closures in sectors such as science, research, education, and public procurement. However, it continues to face constraints in judicial reform credibility and competition enforcement. Albania, which has only recently reached full opening under the revised cluster methodology, is at the initial stage of substantive harmonisation. It is neither in the closure-limiting position of Serbia nor in the near-consolidation phase of Montenegro but at the beginning of *acquis* transposition across all clusters.

It is of particular importance to analyse the progress reports concerning all six negotiation clusters (European Commission, 2025) for both North Macedonia and Albania, especially in light of the emerging narrative that "*Albania has moved significantly ahead and is likely to become a member by 2030.*" Both the President of the European Council, Antonio Costa, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, recently underscored Albania's accelerated progress, noting that alongside Montenegro it is currently among the most advanced candidates, with von

der Leyen describing Albania’s pace over the past three to four years as “*remarkably fast.*” (SDK, 2025).

Nevertheless, the commendations regarding Albania’s progress and the projections that it may become a member of the European Union by 2030 may reasonably be situated in line with the 2018 assessment, which similarly anticipated that Serbia and Montenegro would attain full membership by 2025.

Table 1. Cluster-based performance (2025): North Macedonia and Albania

Cluster	Status	Albania	North Macedonia
Fundamentals	Readiness	Moderately prepared	Some to moderate
	Progress	Some/limited progress	No progress in Ch.23, limited in Ch.24
Internal market	Readiness	Mostly moderate	Early to moderate to good
	Progress	Mixed: some, limited, no progress in goods	No progress in goods, workers, competition, company law
Competitiveness & Inclusive Growth	Readiness	Moderate to good	Moderate to good
	Progress	Mostly limited/some	Some; no progress in industrial policy
Green Agenda & Connectivity	Readiness	From some to good	Moderate to good
	Progress	No progress in environment	Limited progress; persistent enforcement gap
Agriculture & Cohesion	Readiness	Some to moderate	Moderate to good
	Progress	Limited/some	Some progress
External Relations	Readiness	Good	Good
	Progress	Some to good	Good progress

Source: Authors’ assessment based on European Commission – Enlargement Package, Country Progress Reports: Albania and North Macedonia (2025).

Albania and North Macedonia display comparable mid-level alignment with the EU *acquis* across multiple policy areas. However, their negotiation statuses diverge significantly: Only Albania has formally had negotiation clusters opened. As a result, despite evidence of preparation in domains such as capital markets, customs, science policy, food safety, research cooperation, and public-administration modernization, North Macedonia’s path toward accession remains conditional on obtaining formal approval, a prerequisite for converting technical readiness into actual negotiation leverage. By contrast, Albania benefits from both ongoing reform efforts and an established negotiation framework, enabling it to channel institutional and legal progress into tangible accession momentum. Thus, while Albania is already engaged in the structured “negotiation (end)game” with modest but steady advances, North Macedonia remains in a “pre-negotiation” state.

CONCLUSION

The regional construct “Western Balkans” is rooted in a durable perception of the Balkans as Europe’s externalised Other. With the absorption capacity and enlargement practices of the European Union, the conceptual geography of the Balkans has contracted: states that accede no longer form part of the Balkan discursive category, while those outside remain designated as the Western Balkans. This makes the notion structurally reductive. Croatia’s accession in 2013 reduced the grouping to six, all either engaged in negotiations, granted candidate status (BiH), or classified as potential candidates (Kosovo).

EU engagement with the Western Balkans has been consistent since the early 2000s, yet integration remains stalled, reflecting both enlargement fatigue within the Union and shifting geopolitical prioritisation of the region. While Western Balkan states continue to face substantive deficiencies in meeting the Copenhagen criteria, the prolonged and frequently suspended accession trajectory has simultaneously reinforced internal regional cohesion and encouraged alternative frameworks of functional cooperation, most notably Open Balkan. Although the initiative is not particularly distinctive in terms of its stated objectives nor in the fact that it is domestically initiated, its political rationale is analytically significant: as Semenov (2022) observes, Belgrade, Pristina, and Skopje share a common perception that their barriers to advancement are not primarily internal but externally imposed. In this sense, Open Balkan operates not only as a vehicle for economic harmonisation but also as a narrative response to protracted EU conditionality, functioning parallel to, and occasionally in substitution for, European integration logics. This stagnation has simultaneously generated space for increased influence from non-EU actors, particularly China and Russia (Jelesijević, 2024), reinforcing the dual character of the Western Balkans as a geographic enclave and a geopolitical vacuum. Yet the states of the region must not be interpreted solely as passive recipients of geopolitical competition; they possess agency and strategic alignment capacity within this environment (Lehne, 2020).

North Macedonia illustrates the systemic inconsistencies of enlargement conditionality more clearly than any other state in the region. Although a candidate since 2005, recommended for negotiations in 2009 and formally opened in 2022, the state remains constrained by the constitutional obligations linked to the 2022 French Presidency proposal. This follows nearly two decades of blockage associated with Greece and the name issue, formally resolved by the Prespa Agreement, which enabled NATO accession but did not produce a corresponding acceleration towards EU membership. The case transmits a broader integrative message to the region, particularly Serbia, demonstrating that the resolution of identity-linked disputes does not automatically translate into accession progress.

Although Albania has opened all negotiation clusters, this procedural milestone does not equate to chapter closure nor imminent accession. Comparative assessment of the most recent Commission's reports shows that, in the absence of identity-linked conditionality, North Macedonia does not significantly lag behind the remaining Western Balkan states in *acquis* alignment and institutional preparedness. Complementary to this conclusion is the statement of the President of the Government of North Macedonia, Hristijan Mickoski (SDK, 2025), who, commenting on the latest European Commission report (2025), observed: "When one analyses the state of preparedness of each country, the objective assessment is that Montenegro is first, we share second place with Serbia, followed by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo." This further illustrates the weight of the political narrative on regional comparative advancement and how progress by other Western Balkan candidates is framed in direct relation to North Macedonia's positioning within the enlargement process.

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