

**THE EU'S  
GEOPOLITICAL  
TURN TOWARDS  
THE WESTERN  
BALKANS:  
ENDURING MYTH  
OR A NEW REALITY?**

# POLICY PAPERS 05/2025

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**Copyright** Instytut Europy Środkowej | Institute of Central Europe  
**ISBN** 978-83-67678-92-6

**Published and edited by**

Instytut Europy Środkowej | Institute of Central Europe  
ul. Niecała 5  
20-080 Lublin, Poland  
[www.ies.lublin.pl](http://www.ies.lublin.pl)

**Cover design and typesetting** Amadeusz Targoński

**Print** [www.drukarniaakapit.pl](http://www.drukarniaakapit.pl)

# THE EU'S GEOPOLITICAL TURN TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS: ENDURING MYTH OR A NEW REALITY?

Edited by **Spasimir Domaradzki**



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# INTRODUCTION

A year after the publication of our first report on the EU's geopolitical turn towards the Western Balkans, which included contributions from authors from the region, there remains a need for close observation of the political, economic and social processes in the non-EU Balkan states. Despite the EU's lasting commitment to the region, these countries carry diverse political and social experiences that directly impact their EU membership prospects.

The ongoing war in Ukraine and the current confrontation between Russia and the West continue to impact the pace of events in the region. Simultaneously, regardless of national authorities' public declarations that EU membership is a priority, the candidates and potential candidate differ not only in their determination for membership but, in some cases, raise the legitimate question of whether joining the EU remains a priority. Hence, there is a need to further monitor the extent to which this overarching environment impacts the political, economic and social priorities at national levels in the non-EU Balkan states.

Following a slightly adjusted methodology from the previous year, experts from the six Western Balkan countries (WB6) contributed their assessments of the political developments in their countries for the period between September 2024 and September 2025, providing a rich picture of overlapping, colliding or competing political dynamics within the region. Their overviews of the political processes reveal very different trends related to enlargement dynamics. Despite internal challenges, Albania and Montenegro continue along the path of needed reforms and reproachment with the EU. Conversely, the process has stalled in Serbia, where President Vučić largely abandoned the enlargement agenda. In North Macedonia, enlargement continues to be held hostage to the internal identity narrative, which serves

as a justification for the lack of any advancement in negotiations with the EU. After a prolonged political limbo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, chances for the implementation of the Growth Plan have finally improved. In Kosovo, while the internal political crisis dominated most of the analysed period, the EU decided to weaken its punitive measures.

Spasimir Domaradzki

# ALBANIA

Jubjana Vila

Albania's steady progress from EU applicant to negotiating country over a course of 15 years was followed by an accelerated negotiation process over the past year, highlighting both opportunities and challenges for the country, as well as introducing the EU's new geopolitical narrative for the region. Albania's relationship with the European Union has been a key component in the country's domestic and foreign policy since the early 2000s. This relationship, driven by efforts to comply with EU accession criteria, emphasises alignment with the legal framework and political and economic standards of the EU. In the last two decades, characterised by gradual efforts and steps, Albania's EU integration has specifically focused on judiciary, governance, and public administration reforms. The process has been a long and challenging one, exhibiting periods of both accelerations and slowdowns due to internal and external dynamics and factors. Albania was granted candidate status by the European Council in June 2014, five years after submitting its membership application in April 2009. In April 2018, the European Commissions issued a recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania, and in March 2020 the Council agreed to initiate the negotiations process. The First Intergovernmental Conference, held in July 2022, communicated the start of the screening process, which was concluded within two years, leading to the opening of accession negotiations on Cluster 1–Fundamentals in October 2024.

The country's unprecedented advancement in the EU accession negotiations, opening 4 out of 6 clusters in less than a year, can be understood from different angles. It is a clear manifestation of the EU's geopolitical (re)turn

towards the region, even though it has provoked debates on the effectiveness and sustainability of this approach. Moreover, it reopens the debate on EU accession as both a political and technical process. The momentum highlights the de facto decoupling in the EU's approach to enlargement in Western Balkans, separating the Albania's EU integration process from that of North Macedonia. Moreover, this new approach helped revive hope for membership after prolonged accession processes and integration fatigue across the WB countries. It has been welcomed by the Albanian population, which shows the highest support to EU accession across the WB region. According to WeBalkans Annual Survey, conducted in June 2025, 92% of participants would vote in favour of Albania's EU membership if a hypothetical referendum was to be held. While support and expectations are real, sustaining this momentum depends on producing concrete reform results.

### **EU-Albania relations (2024-2025)**

By September 2025, Albania had started negotiations on 4 clusters, including Cluster 1 – Fundamentals (15 October 2024), Cluster 6 – External Relations (17 December 2024), Cluster 2 – Internal Market (14 April 2025) and Cluster 3 – Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth (22 May 2025). The EU has set benchmarks for the chapters but, to date, none have been provisionally closed. The EC 2024 Communication on Enlargement Policy underlines the readiness of the Commission to support Albania's ambitious objective to close accession negotiations by the end of 2027. However, they reinforce the need for further progress through the intensification of EU oriented reforms, specifically mentioning the rule of law, law enforcement, the fight against organised crime and corruption, and the promotion of fundamental rights, including property rights, minority rights, and media freedom. Besides the four Intergovernmental Conferences launching negotiating clusters, one of the most important

events in this last year was the 6th European Political Community (EPC) Summit held in Tirana on 16 May 2025. This summit, aside from discussing the challenges of the European community in a new world, also had a symbolic meaning, underlying the strategic partnership status of Albania and reaffirming the EU commitment to enlargement. It is important to note that Albania has been a venue for two other important EU–Western Balkans summits in 2022 and 2023. Such developments reinforce the geopolitical narrative of accelerated negotiations.

On 23 October 2024, the European Commission approved Albania's Reform Agenda under the Reform and Growth Facility as a key component of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans during the period of 2024–2027. The Growth Plan provides financial assistance to the countries of the region under the New Reform and Growth Facility to speed up the socio-economic convergence and prepare them for EU membership. This plan offers a concrete opportunity to support Albania's ambition to complete negotiations by 2027 and achieve EU membership by 2030. Approval of the Reform Agenda paved the way for 922.1 million EUR in financial support for Albania until 2027, tied to the implementation of 31 priority reforms in key policy areas, such as rule of law and fundamental rights, private sector development, human capital, green transition, and digital economy. The disbursement of funds is conditional to Albania's progress in the implementation of its Reform Agenda. The European Commission released pre-financing, amounting to 64.5 million EUR, on 25 March 2025. The fund included 30 million EUR accorded to the state budget for reform support, and 34.5 million EUR allocated to the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) for infrastructure investments in Albania. There is limited information on the implementation and monitoring of the Reform Agenda in Albania by September 2025. Even though Albania has successfully delivered the first report and received pre-financing, it continues to struggle

with persistent issues like judicial reform and informal economy. In September 2025, as a sign and display of its commitment to anti-corruption reforms, the newly elected government introduced the AI assistant *Diella* as a “virtual minister” for public procurement transparency; however, this decision has sparked debates on its constitutional status and effectiveness.

### Internal dialogue on the EU

Albania’s EU membership aspirations and proclaimed ambitions, coupled with the renewed geopolitical focus of the EU in the region, as well as the acceleration of negotiations, have intensified the internal public discourse on EU integration prospects. The internal discourse of political parties, public opinion and civil society requires attention, considering their impact in shaping reform implementation and absorption. EU integration has never been a politically divisive issue among national political actors in Albania, who share the viewpoint that the future of Albania lies in the EU. The main debate evolves around the pace of the process, and there are inquiries into the actor’s capabilities to deliver it.

Despite widespread support for EU membership, political polarisation continues to hinder consensus on reforms, in a context when cross-party cooperation is mandatory for EU membership progress. The main political parties in Albania, the Democratic Party and Socialist Party, are both proponents of EU membership. EU membership became a primary campaign promise and slogan of the Socialist Party for the first time during the 2025 parliamentary elections. This strategy, which demonstrates the ambitions and vows of the party, portrayed EU membership not just as a national goal but also as a political one, as well as mobilisation tool. Yet, the Democrats, who support EU integration but are critical of the actual reform implementation, approached this promise with skepticism. Hence, while both major parties

support the EU integration path, the Socialist Party points out the importance of reforms and transformative power of EU membership, while the Democratic Party highlights the need for tangible progress in reforms.

Civil society actors play a crucial role in shaping the national discourse on EU accession. They have the responsibility to promote and monitor reform implementation across all clusters of negotiations focusing on issues of human rights, rule of law, good governance, corruption, etc. While the EU-funded initiatives tailored for civil society actors have strengthened their position, they face notable challenges that can limit their effectiveness, independence and sustainability. They are free to operate, but struggle with bureaucratic obstacles, funding constraints, and political pressure that can hamper their role as promoters and watchdog of reform implementation.

Public support for EU integration is very strong in Albania. According to Eurobarometer 2025 data, 91% of Albanians support EU membership, and 92% of them would vote for membership in a hypothetical referendum, according to WeBalkans 2025 survey. Albanians mainly associate EU membership with better economic opportunities, free movement, and rule of law. While there might be skepticism regarding the effectiveness of EU-imposed and accelerated reforms, nationalistic and anti-EU narratives are quite rare and not entirely welcome.

Overall, the national discourse frames EU accession as a strategic roadmap for development and transformation, and points out the need to take advantage of the current geopolitical momentum. Also, there is skepticism on whether an accelerated reform implementation can produce tangible benefits for the Albanian society. Finally, the one-million-dollar question remains: How realistic is the 2027 target, and will this momentum contribute to national or party political objectives?

## Expert voice

The redefinition of Albania's EU membership trajectory, coupled with the intensification of bilateral relations with the EU over the last year, has provoked discussions on the future of EU enlargement and the relevance of conditionality versus geopolitical considerations. Comparatively speaking, the acceleration of negotiations over the last year has been driven more by geopolitical imperatives rather than the fulfilment of criteria. The intensification of relations – manifested through strong political, technical and rhetorical support of the EU – can be perceived as an elevation of the status of Albania from that of merely a negotiating candidate country to a strategic partner in the region. Albania's consistent alignment with the EU's foreign policy positions and sanctions provides leverage and confirms its credibility as a regional partner committed to strategic integration beyond conditionality. Hence, Albania's EU accession is framed as beneficial not only for the development of the country but also for European stability. This new geopolitical momentum has created both opportunities and challenges, and has increased expectations as well as pressure to deliver reforms. Whether this will result in a critical juncture or an unsustainable failure depends on the ability and efforts of Albania and EU to focus geopolitical attention into measurable progress.

Progress in completing the screening process, opening 24 out of 35 chapters for negotiations, Reform Agenda approval, and the release of funds under the Growth Plan, reflect the intensification of relations. Such developments have affected both domestic and external expectations, focusing on the evaluation of reforms in terms of effectiveness and measurable outcomes rather than just legal transposition. Closing the gap between legislative frameworks and tangible outcomes, reflected in the everyday lives of citizens, is essential to ensure credibility in the EU accession process. In an accelerated process of implereform implementation, priority areas remain the judiciary, public

administration, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the division of power with a focus on the independence of institutions. In addition, this rapid reform implementation can exceed the capacities of the institutions. The sustainability of strong public opinion support for EU membership depends on the delivery of tangible benefits for citizens. Failure to deliver can lead to frustration, disillusionment, and fatigue. The acceleration of reforms – based on a geopolitical narrative – should not overshadow the consolidation of democratic institutions trading short-term benefits for long-term institutional development.

Political polarisation remained a challenge to negotiations in the last year, affecting the process and its legitimacy. Divisions have led to delays in legislative adoption, slowed down the implementation of judicial and administrative measures, and have the potential to undermine the credibility of reforms. This polarisation was reinforced with the politicisation of EU membership in the last 2025 parliamentary elections by using accession as a tool to claim credit for reforms or to criticise opponents and frame it as a political achievement rather than a shared national objective. It also raised doubts across public opinion whether reforms are conducted to serve national interests or to merely benefit political actors.

Albania should consolidate the geopolitical momentum by enhancing the institutional capacities for the rapid implementation of depoliticised reforms and ensure that political polarisation does not interfere with the timely adoption and delivery of reforms, in addition to monitoring progress in terms of tangible benefits for its citizens. Moreover, while Albania continues its alignment with the Unions' strategic goals, the EU should maintain clear conditionality and financial support for reform implementation. The analysed period portrays a dynamic EU–Albania relationship, marked by opportunities and vulnerabilities. The sustainability of this relationship is subject to the interplay between tangible and credible domestic reforms, consistent EU support,

and geopolitical dynamics. This complex interplay will determine whether this momentum will be sustained, and EU membership becomes a reality, or if it will fade and EU accession will remain merely an aspiration for Albania.

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# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Nedžma Džananović

## Prologue

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) entered 2025 in its gravest crisis since Dayton, driven by the now-formally removed Milorad Dodik's open defiance of state institutions. Convicted and stripped of his presidency in the Republika Srpska entity<sup>1</sup> (RS), he continued for some time to claim the post, backed by entity authorities that passed unconstitutional laws blocking state institutions.

After 15 years of secessionist rhetoric, anti-EU threats, and obstruction, 2025 saw Dodik push further, emboldened by trips to Moscow<sup>2</sup> and Budapest, where Hungarian officials hailed him as “president”. The overlap with Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos's visit to Sarajevo underscored a divided EU: Brussels demanding reforms, Budapest offering cover. In response, during the year, several EU states (Germany, Austria, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, and Slovenia) imposed sanctions or travel bans, marking the most pronounced international pushback yet.

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<sup>1</sup> Milorad Dodik was removed as President of RS in August 2025 after being convicted and sentenced to prison, which legally disqualified him from office. Although his party initially rejected the decision and refused to accept new elections, Dodik later backed down and nominated Siniša Karan as his party's candidate in the upcoming vote.

<sup>2</sup> Dodik met with Russian President Putin in Sochi on October 2, 2025 following their earlier meeting in May in Moscow.

Despite massive EU engagement, high-level visits, financial pledges through the Growth Plan and IPA III, and undeniably strong and clear political messaging, no meaningful steps on the EU path have been achieved. The crisis consumed all political energy, stalling reforms and blocking the Reform Plan. For both BiH and the EU, 2025 increasingly appears to be a make-or-break moment: either reforms and rule of law advance, or the country's European future risks slipping further away, along with the EU's credibility.

### **Dubious accession process**

In late September 2025, EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos spent three days in Bosnia and Herzegovina to reaffirm the Union's support for the country's European future and to press for reforms required under the Growth Plan. The visit unfolded against the backdrop of repeated delays in reform implementation, constitutional and institutional deadlock, and growing EU warnings about the risk of losing funds. While Kos engaged with civil society, youth, media, and local communities to highlight the EU's broad engagement and financial investment, political leaders from RS's ruling SNSD party boycotted her visit and refused to attend her parliamentary address.

Her message expressed both reassurance – that BiH's EU path remains open – and warnings: reforms cannot wait, funding is at risk, and 2026 must not be lost (FENA Agency, 2025). Yet the boycotts and hostile statements from RS officials revealed a persistent political impasse and suggested that critical deadlines may once again be missed. In many ways, the visit epitomised the current state of EU–BiH relations: the EU stands as a committed funder and partner, while BiH remains an underperforming candidate, consumed by internal crisis. The paradox is clear – despite strong EU rhetoric, significant financial leverage, and growing political engagement, entrenched domestic resistance, amplified by

Russian support for obstructionist actors, continues to stall real progress.

Despite the bleak 2023 Progress Report (Džananović, 2024, p. 22; European Commission Staff, 2023), the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations in March 2024, strongly backed by EC President Ursula von der Leyen. She overpraised limited reforms on money laundering, conflict of interest, and migration, referring to them as “impressive steps”, though many stressed that core structural issues in the judiciary, public administration, and electoral integrity remained unaddressed (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Von der Leyen reinforced this support with two high-profile visits in 2024. In March, shortly before the recommendation to open negotiations, she announced the Commission’s intention to recommend accession talks. In October, returning after devastating floods, she pledged 20 million EUR from the EU Solidarity Fund for immediate relief and longer-term reconstruction. Beyond solidarity, she used the visit to promote the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, stressing that reforms in governance, the economy, and energy would unlock access to the EU single market and new investments. Infrastructure priorities such as Corridor Vc, clean transport, and renewable energy were presented as tangible benefits on the EU path (Associated Press, 2024). Her visits ensured BiH remained strategically anchored to Europe in a time of wider regional instability.

But by late 2024, this fragile momentum had dissipated. Political fragmentation and polarisation ahead of local elections derailed reform efforts, and the 2024 Progress Report reaffirmed the depth of the crisis (European Commission Staff, 2024). Policymaking remained uncoordinated, public administration politicised, and the judiciary plagued by corruption and political interference. Anti-corruption initiatives were symbolic but ineffective, while the electoral system remained discriminatory and non-compliant with European standards. Conditions for media and civil society

worsened, especially in the RS Entity, where restrictive legislation undermined freedoms.

The 8th Stabilisation and Association Committee meeting in September 2025 delivered a sobering assessment (N1 BiH, 2025b). While acknowledging some legislative progress, the EC warned that reform momentum had stalled. In effect, the conclusions foreshadowed the expected 2025 Progress Report.

### **The EU's other role**

BiH demonstrates that the EU's credibility depends not only on enlargement, but also on its ability to act as a foreign policy and security guarantor. This dimension of the Union's engagement in BiH, as well as in the region, has often been overshadowed by the slow and uneven accession process.

The visit of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas to Sarajevo on 8 April 2025 underscored this dual role. Her presence highlighted both the EU's commitment to BiH's sovereignty and the contradictions it faces in delivering on that promise, which are most visible in the functioning of EUFOR Althea (Sarajevo Times, 2025). Active since 2004, the mission continues to train the armed forces and maintain a deterrent presence. EUFOR's credibility, however, has been occasionally questioned. In 2024, Austria handed over command to Hungary, raising concerns given Budapest's pro-Russian and ethnonationalist stance (Spaić, 2023). Although the mandate of Hungarian General László Stitz ended without incident and was smoothly transferred in January 2025 to Romanian General Florin Barbu, doubts resurfaced only weeks later. In February, Hungary's Special Counter-Terrorism Unit (TEK) was reported to have covertly entered BiH for "joint exercises" with the RS police, coinciding with the verdict against Dodik. The incident fuelled speculation that TEK had prepared for Dodik's extraction if arrested – further undermining trust in Hungary's role (N1 Sarajevo, 2025).

This episode exposed deeper vulnerabilities with implications far beyond Bosnia. When member states with conflicting loyalties lead EUFOR, the mission's legitimacy and, by extension, the EU's credibility as a security guarantor, may come into question. To address this, the Union needs a more strategic and unified approach to EUFOR staffing and command appointments, ensuring that contributing states and personnel are fully aligned with EU values and foreign policy objectives.

Kaja Kallas's second visit to BiH this year on 3 November 2025 came at a pivotal moment—between the UN Security Council's renewal of EUFOR Althea's mandate for another year and the upcoming EC's Progress Report—where she underscored that the EU will not tolerate security or reform gaps, urging domestic leaders to take full responsibility for the country's European path (Beta Briefing, 2025). She also made it clear that international supervision in BiH should be phased out once the country's authorities demonstrate the capacity to make and implement decisions independently.

## **EU financial assistance and trade**

The EU is the country's largest trading partner and primary source of financial assistance. In 2023, trade in goods with the EU accounted for 64% of BiH's total trade, including 73% of exports and 59% of imports. The trade volume reached 14.6 billion EUR, underlining the EU's role as BiH's primary market and economic anchor (European Commission Staff, 2024, p. 93).

EU financial support remains unparalleled. Through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), the EU has committed 539.6 million EUR under IPA II (2014–2020) and 309.8 million EUR under IPA III (2021–2024). Nearly 44% of this funding is dedicated to promoting good governance, the rule of law, and human rights – key accession pillars – while the rest supports inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

During her visit to Sarajevo, EU Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos highlighted the EU's commitment to the "Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art", a flagship project financed under the EU4Culture program (Press and Information Team of the Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025), as well as a 7 million EUR financial package for independent media and civil society organizations in BiH, to be disbursed by 2027 (FENA & N1 BiH, 2025).

### **Growth plan stalemate: Politics over progress**

Launched in November 2023, the EU's 6 billion EUR Growth Plan offers Western Balkan countries early access to the single market in exchange for Reform Agendas covering governance, rule of law, and economic reforms. For BiH, this involved a multi-layered process of coordination across the state level, two entities, and ten cantons – each with its own political agenda and veto powers (Džananović et al., 2023).

The process officially began in early 2024, when a working group composed of representatives from various levels of government began drafting BiH's Reform Agenda. Despite significant engagement, the April 30 deadline for submission passed without consensus. The RS authorities refused to endorse certain reform points, particularly those related to the Constitutional Court of BiH and the enforcement of its rulings. Throughout mid-2024, the EU extended deadlines and intensified its diplomatic pressure. High-level officials, including Gert Jan Koopman from the European Commission, visited Sarajevo, warning that failure to adopt the agenda would result in BiH forfeiting initial pre-financing – approximately 70 million EUR – and risk losing further tranches of support. While several drafts circulated among stakeholders, disagreements over governance reforms, judicial appointments, and budgetary allocation remained unresolved.

On 27 June 2025, Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos announced on X that BiH had adopted its Reform Agenda,

a claim welcomed by Council of Ministers Chairwoman Borjana Krišto, and hailed as a breakthrough. However, weeks later, news emerged that the Council had never formally approved the document, and in an emergency session in September, the proposal again failed to secure support. SNSD ministers from RS blocked its adoption, objecting to provisions on judicial authority and fiscal centralisation. Foreign Minister Elmedin Konaković condemned their obstruction, accusing them of acting on instructions from Moscow. The episode laid bare the country's internal divide between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations within the state-level government.

As the only Western Balkan country to miss the Reform Agenda submission deadline, BiH was excluded from the disbursement of the pre-financing tranche worth approximately 70 million EUR, a penalty automatically triggered by non-compliance. The total EU allocation under the Growth Plan for BiH has been reduced by more than 100 million EUR, bringing its potential envelope down from the originally planned 1.085 billion EUR to approximately 976.6 million EUR. In a phone session held after Commissioner Kos's visit, Ministers from Dodik's SNSD party lifted their vetoes regarding the adoption of the document, and the Council of Ministers of BiH adopted the Reform Agenda (European Western Balkans, 2025). Its content, however, remains undisclosed, highlighting the persistent lack of transparency. The document now awaits evaluation by the EC.

In her October 14th visit to BiH, Ursula von der Leyen urged the country to take the necessary steps toward holding the first intergovernmental conference—starting with the adoption of judicial reform laws and the appointment of a chief negotiator (Reporters, 2025).

### **Public support for EU membership**

Support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's accession to the European Union remains high but increasingly uneven between

the two entities. The 2024 survey by the Directorate for European Integration indicates that 71.2% of citizens would vote for EU membership.

In the RS Entity, nearly 38% would vote against accession, compared to just 9.9% in the Federation of the BiH Entity. Views on the EU's future also diverge: 54.4% in the Federation see the Union as cohesive and expanding, but only 30.7% in RS agree; a third there predict collapse or fragmentation.

Motivations for membership are centred around free movement, peace, stability, and a stronger rule of law. Opposition is driven by fears of higher costs, excessive centralisation, and emigration. Youth are seen as the main beneficiaries (42.2%), though RS respondents are more likely to see politicians as the winners (29.2% vs. 18.1%). Farmers are viewed as least likely to gain (4.9%). Expectations of better living standards mirror these divides: 63.5% in the Federation foresee significant improvement, compared to only 39.1% in RS.

The truck drivers' crisis<sup>3</sup> in 2025 brought these sentiments into sharper focus. This sector employs tens of thousands and is vital for BiH's EU trade. Treating drivers as tourists rather than essential service providers undermines competitiveness and risks relocating firms to EU states. The drivers' repeated protests<sup>4</sup> against Schengen stay limits and border inefficiencies resonated far beyond the transport sector, as they touched directly on citizens' everyday

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<sup>3</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina's transport sector, like much of the Western Balkans, has been hit hard by the rigid application of Schengen's "90/180 rule", which limits non-EU nationals to 90 days of stay in the area within any 180-day period. For professional drivers crossing borders daily, this rule is unworkable, forcing many to interrupt routes or risk fines, arrests, and re-entry bans.

<sup>4</sup> In April, 500 trucks paraded through Sarajevo demanding rule changes, excise refunds, and faster border procedures. In late August, around 600 trucks blocked customs terminals and border crossings with Croatia and Serbia, paralyzing supply chains and costing exporters millions, especially in agriculture.

frustrations with mobility, fairness, and access to the EU. The sight of hundreds of trucks blocking borders not only disrupted trade but also symbolised the gap between the EU's promises of integration and the barriers still facing ordinary people. For many, it became a vivid example of why enthusiasm for the EU has declined. While the EU promotes integration through the Growth Plan and promises access to the single market, practical barriers like border delays and Schengen restrictions persist.

## Conclusion

The trajectory of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2025 encapsulates the profound contradictions that continue to define its relationship with the European Union. On the one hand, the EU remains the country's largest trading partner, principal donor, and strategic anchor. On the other hand, the dynamics of domestic politics – shaped above all by secessionist obstruction from RS and its leadership – continue to stall substantive reform and undermine the accession process. The outcome is a protracted stalemate that threatens to erode not only BiH's European future but also the EU's credibility as both an enlargement actor and a foreign policy guarantor.

Dodik's repeated obstruction, bolstered by ties to Moscow and shielded by political allies within the EU, has transformed secessionist rhetoric into a durable instrument of political bargaining. What is striking about 2025 is the extent to which these tactics escalated into open confrontation, consuming virtually all political energy and leaving reform commitments unfulfilled.

The EU's response has been significant, yet inconsistent. Financial commitments under the Growth Plan, IPA III, and the WBIF represent unprecedented engagement, while the series of past and upcoming high-level EU visits signals Brussels' sustained political investment. At the same time, sanctions imposed by several member states on Dodik

indicate a sharper international stance. These measures co-exist with internal contradictions: the divergence between Brussels' conditionality and Budapest's protection of Dodik epitomises the lack of a unified European approach. The credibility of EUFOR Althea that was nearly compromised by Hungarian leadership controversies, further illustrates how divergent national loyalties undermine the EU's claim to act as a coherent security guarantor.

Equally revealing is the case of the truck drivers' protests. What began as a sectoral dispute over Schengen stay limits evolved into a symbol of broader frustrations with the EU. For ordinary citizens, the protests illuminated a recurring paradox: while the EU promises opportunity, mobility, and integration, the reality is often marked by rigid rules, bureaucratic barriers, and persistent inequality of access. As opinion surveys show, enthusiasm for accession remains high but is steadily declining, with marked divergence between the two entities in BiH. The drivers' demands for fair treatment thus resonate with the public's deeper anxieties about whether integration is deliverable, or whether the EU remains more rhetorical than real.

The 2025 dynamics suggest it may mark a decisive juncture. For BiH, the choice is stark: either advance on the path of institutional reform or risk permanent marginalisation within Europe's periphery. For the EU, the stakes are equally high. Enlargement policy in BiH is no longer simply about conditionality and benchmarks; it has become a litmus test of the Union's geopolitical credibility. If the EU fails to secure progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it risks not only losing influence to rival powers but also undermining the very foundations of its enlargement narrative in the Western Balkans.

Thus, the year of escalations reveals a double crisis of credibility. For BiH, it is the credibility of its political elites to commit to reforms and honour the aspirations of their citizens. For the EU, it is the credibility of its promise that membership is both attainable and transformative. Whether

2025 will be remembered as the year of rupture or the year of renewal will depend on whether these two crises are resolved in tandem.

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# KOSOVO

Shpat Blackori

The following section provides an overview of key developments that shaped Kosovo–EU relations between September 2024 and September 2025, illustrating both progress and setbacks across various dimensions.

## **Technical reforms and political symbolism**

The European Commission’s 2024 annual report assessed Kosovo’s technical progress in public administration as well as Economic Development and Competitiveness, but raised concerns over the lack of progress in the rule of law and limited progress in aligning legislation with EU standards in areas such as the free movement of goods, services, and capital (European Commission, 2024). This points to a technical alignment with the EU’s formal requirements, but not to a deeper internal political transformation.

In October 2024, the European Commission approved the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which included Kosovo in projects related to the green transition, regional connectivity, and energy. Kosovo’s inclusion signals that despite political obstacles, it is increasingly being treated as part of the functional enlargement framework (Kallxo.com, 2024).

## **Visa liberalisation: A symbolic success within a complex context**

Although visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens officially came into effect on 1 January 2024, this milestone followed a period of considerable instability in Kosovo–EU relations.

Notably, the European Union (EU) had decided to impose “reversible and temporary measures” against the Kosovar government (Koha.net, 2023). This move came as a response to the government’s decision to send the new mayors – elected with insignificant participation of the electorate in the northern municipalities – to their public offices, despite calls from Western partners to refrain from such an action. As a result, riots ensued, and for the first time in many years, KFOR deployed troops on the ground to defend municipality buildings. In subsequent violent clashes between local hooligans and KFOR soldiers, as much as 90 of the latter were wounded (Group for Legal and Political Studies [GLPS] 2024). The EU placed the blame for the raised tensions squarely on the Kosovar government and subsequently announced measures that included the suspension of new applications for EU funds and the suspension of high-level meetings between Kosovar authorities and the EU and member states representatives (Deutsche Welle, 2023). It is difficult to put a price tag on the financial impact of these measures, with estimates ranging from 26 million EUR all the way to 300 million EUR (Voice of America, 2024).

Another event that has affected relations between Kosovo and the EU was the attack on the village of Banjske in northern Kosovo by a group of Serbian criminals, in which a Kosovo policeman was killed by gunfire. Ever since then, Serbia has refused to arrest and extradite the self-confessed author of the attack, Milan Radoicic, placed its army on a war footing near the Kosovo border, and voted and lobbied against Kosovo’s accession to the Council of Europe, in violation of the Ohrid Agreement (GLPS, 2024a). Consequently, not a single action was taken by the EU to reprimand Serbia for these escalatory steps. Naturally, this has raised questions about the impartiality of the European mediators and their unequal approach towards the parties in the dialogue (GLPS, 2024b).

Thus, visa liberalisation represented a symbolic success, recognising Kosovo’s progress towards EU integration, but

it did not translate into immediate political advancement, such as candidate status, due to ongoing political challenges and setbacks.

### **Continued challenges after visa liberalisation**

Throughout 2024 and into 2025, Kosovo faced sustained EU pressure regarding the implementation of agreements on northern Kosovo and the establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. In April 2025, these issues contributed to a deadlock in dialogue, with the EU emphasising the need for political consensus and the fulfilment of conditions to move forward (EEAS, 2025).

### **Green light for the resumption of cooperation**

In May 2025, the European Union began gradually lifting punitive measures against Kosovo, linking this step to the de-escalation of the crisis and the return to institutional normality (Reuters, 2025). This step reflected the EU's acknowledgment of substantive progress in Kosovo's governance, its compliance with previously established conditions, and its preparedness to participate in the 6 billion EUR Western Balkans growth plan. It is important to mention that according to Reuters as part of the measures against Kosovo, the EU bloc cut funding of at least 150 million EUR (170 million USD).

### **Partial constitution of the Assembly of Kosovo**

The national elections of 9 February 2025 resulted in a victory for the Self-Determination Movement, with its candidate Albin Kurti emerging as the winner. Although the party secured 48 seats in the Assembly, this result was not enough to secure complete majority. Moreover, no political agreement has been reached among the parties to secure a governing coalition. Disputes regarding the election of

the Speaker of Parliament led to 57 unsuccessful attempts to convene the Assembly, with a Speaker finally elected on the 58th attempt. However, at the time of writing this policy paper, the full constitution of the Assembly remains incomplete, as the vote for the Serbian Deputy Speaker has stalled.

Deputies vote for candidates from the Serbian List – the Serbian party representing the Belgrade-based and most populous country in the Kosovo Assembly with 9 seats. Due to the Serbian List's refusal to replace Slavko Simić's candidates for deputy speaker, the newly elected parliamentarians voted through a lottery to select other candidates, including Nenad Rašić, the leader of the Freedom, Justice and Survival party, who is closely aligned with the leader of Vetëvendosje. As Rašić did not receive any votes during the voting process, neither did the other Serbian List deputies (REL, 2025). The Deputy Speakers assist the Speaker in carrying out their duties and act with their authorisation. According to the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly of Kosovo (2022), the three largest parliamentary groups each propose one candidate for Deputy Speaker, with the candidate from the largest group required to be of the opposite gender to the Speaker. Additionally, one candidate is proposed by the deputies holding guaranteed seats for the Serbian community, and another by deputies representing other non-majority communities. All Deputy Speakers are elected by a majority vote of all Assembly members. This structure is important because it ensures political and ethnic inclusiveness in the leadership of the Assembly, promotes gender balance, and strengthens democratic legitimacy by giving minority communities a formal voice in parliamentary proceedings.

## **Internal dialogue on the EU**

### **Political party discourse**

Between September 2024 and September 2025, Kosovo's domestic political debate on the European Union remained

limited. The ruling party, Vetëvendosje (LVV), repeatedly reacted to the EU's decision, describing the punitive measures as "unfair and absurd". In one interview, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Mr. Kurti, said, "We are constantly demanding the lifting of the punitive measures against Kosovo that date back to June of last year. Those measures have never been fair and now they have become absurd because even the EU High Representative and at the same time the Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of security and foreign policy has written a letter to the 27 EU states that the measures should be lifted. Borrell, who is leaving, can confirm what I am saying, that he is the one who has requested that the measures be lifted but they have not been done yet, therefore the unfair and harmful measures have become absurd and we expect them to be lifted an hour ago, being convinced that they should have been lifted yesterday" (Blic Newspaper, 2024).

In contrast, opposition parties such as PDK and LDK used the crisis to criticise the government's diplomatic performance. The deputy of the opposition party PDK, Ferat Shalla, blamed Prime Minister Kurti for the punitive measures against Kosovo. According to him, his bad governance has brought losses worth hundreds of millions of euros to the country (Monitor, 2024). The deputy of the other opposition party AAK, Time Kadrijaj, said that Prime Minister Albin Kurti violated the conditions and principles established by the EU, and for this reason measures were taken by them (Monitor, 2024). She said that, even though as the opposition calls for the removal of the Kosovo measures due to a loss of 500 million EUR, she believes that Kosovo may be sanctioned again. They stand on their own terms. This divergence illustrates that while the government framed the punitive measures as unjust actions by the EU, the opposition primarily directed its criticism toward the government itself, accusing it of mismanagement and failure to meet the conditions set by Brussels.

### Voices from other societal actors

Beyond party politics, societal actors have also shaped the debate on Kosovo–EU relations. According to the GAP Institute, the measures imposed by the European Union on Kosovo have resulted in significant financial and developmental consequences, costing Kosovo around 613.4 million EUR in suspended or indefinitely postponed projects. Delays in the implementation of projects, mainly caused by the measures imposed by the European Union on Kosovo, do not only constitute a technical obstacle to the flow of financing, but are also translating into concrete losses for society. They directly affect the loss of expected socio-economic benefits as well as the increase in financial costs for subsequent implementation (GAP, 2025). The report further emphasises that the decision to suspend funds slows down economic development, weakens capacities to face major challenges such as energy transition, environmental protection and new jobs, and hinders the building of a more sustainable future for citizens.

Fisnik Osmani, CEO of Pristina City Heating Company “Termokos”, confirms that one of the company’s projects to double the heating capacity in the capital has been suspended due to the freezing of a 17.6 million EUR grant from the European Union. These funds, he says, were part of the IPA programme, which provides financial and technical assistance to countries aiming for the EU, but which in the case of Kosovo has been blocked. “EU sanctions have greatly damaged the economic development of Kosovo. In this case, unfortunately, the City Heating Company has also been damaged, and consequently the city of Pristina and its citizens” (REL, 2025). Also, according to the President of the Chamber of Commerce of Kosovo, these measures have had an impact in two directions, materially and in terms of Kosovo’s image. “When I say in terms of the image of Kosovo, it has not been a good message for foreign investors Kosova, country geographically within the EU to be under punitive measures. And the second material, we had the

chance to see the values or amounts of the projects that had to be implemented and that remained suspended” (Monitor, 2024).

Naim Rashiti, director of the Balkan Policy Group in Pristina, says that Kosovo has ways to convince the EU to lift the measures, giving some examples: “Kosovo should deal with the European agenda process. It should create a roadmap for actions in the north, until it comes to a situation where Serbs return to institutions, free elections are held there and the process of normality begins. I believe this is the condition that the EU is waiting for”. Rashiti says that the punitive measures have had no impact on the behaviour of Kosovo’s institutions and calls them a “disaster” with long-term consequences (REL, 2025a).

Although the European Union began easing punitive measures in May 2025, they have not yet been fully removed, meaning that their financial and developmental impact continues to be felt across institutions, businesses, and society at large.

On the other hand, the European Union’s High Representative reiterated that “now is the time for re-engagement” by Kosovo and Serbia in the Brussels-mediated dialogue to normalise relations between the two countries. Kallas has warned that dialogue is a necessity for them to move towards European integration (REL, 2025a). Kosovo’s readiness to participate in the dialogue process has also been expressed by President Vjosa Osmani, though she has called on the EU in advance to “talk about lifting the measures by the EU, because this damages the credibility of the EU itself” (REL, 2025b). However, a round of dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, held at the level of chief negotiators in Brussels in September 2025, ended without any concrete results.

### **Public discourse and perceptions**

According to the 2024 Autumn Eurobarometer survey, Kosovo citizens have great trust in EU institutions despite the imposition of EU measures in Kosovo. This latest poll was

conducted in September and October in the EU and the candidate countries. It showed that, on average, 51% of Europeans tend to trust the EU, the highest result since 2007. In Kosovo, 70% of people tend to trust the EU, while 65% believe that EU membership would be a good thing (European Western Balkans, 2024). According to journalist Augustin Palokaj, the widespread support among Kosovars for EU integration, and their awareness of assistance provided by the EU, should be leveraged by both the European Union and Kosovo's political parties to work more effectively towards achieving citizens' goals. Palokaj emphasises that Kosovo remains unfairly positioned – not only at the end of the list of candidate countries but as the only country without official candidate status. He also notes that EU citizens generally do not hold objections toward Kosovo compared to other countries, and even welcome support for Kosovo from citizens of states that have not formally recognised it (Koha.net, 2025).

Moreover, a WeBalkans survey conducted between May and June 2025 shows that 59% of Kosovo citizens see economic development as the area where the EU should play a greater role, followed by the fight against corruption (42%), and support for healthcare (39%).

Overall, public opinion in Kosovo indicates significant support for European integration and an appreciation for EU assistance, particularly in areas such as economic development, governance, and public services. Citizens' expectations highlight the role of the EU in fostering progress and stability, suggesting that continued engagement between Kosovo and EU institutions can be guided by public interest and priorities.

### **Contributor's view**

The period between September 2024 and September 2025 highlighted both the fragility and the resilience of Kosovo–EU relations. Events such as the Banjska attack, the

introduction of the EU's restrictive measures, and the stalled dialogue with Serbia demonstrated the extent to which Kosovo's European path is closely intertwined with regional stability and compliance with EU expectations. The EU's decision to impose punitive measures, followed by their partial removal in May 2025, underscored the importance of maintaining constructive engagement and adhering to agreed conditionality. For Kosovo, this episode carries an important lesson: aligning domestic political actions with European requirements is not merely a formal obligation but a practical necessity to avoid long-term economic, social, and reputational costs.

At the same time, the process revealed opportunities. The EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans presents Kosovo with access to increased financial support, deeper integration into the common market, and enhanced regional connectivity. These instruments, together with the IPA framework and Kosovo's participation in initiatives such as the Berlin Process, provide a platform for economic development and institutional strengthening. However, to fully benefit, Kosovo must demonstrate credibility through progress on the rule of law, governance reforms, and constructive participation in the EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia.

Public trust in the EU remains comparatively high, despite the restrictive measures. This creates a valuable political space for both Kosovo's institutions and the EU to translate citizen support into tangible progress on reforms and integration steps. To maintain this trust, Kosovo must show readiness to meet EU expectations, while the EU should ensure that conditionality is applied in a fair and transparent manner, avoiding perceptions of double standards.

In sum, the past year has revealed that the Kosovo–EU relationship is a process defined by both setbacks and opportunities. The lifting of measures should mark a turning point, serving as a reminder that progress depends on

consistent engagement, credible reforms, and constructive diplomacy. For Kosovo, the strategic task ahead is twofold: to consolidate domestic capacities and to seize the openings provided by European initiatives, ensuring that the partnership with the European Union moves toward a more stable, credible, and future-oriented path.

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# MONTENEGRO

Jovana Marović

## Introduction

Montenegro has advanced towards EU membership, taking several formal steps forward over the past year; however, the absence of substantive reforms demonstrates how fragile and reversible this trajectory remains. While the provisional closure of several negotiating chapters, including Chapter 5 on Public Procurement, created an impression of momentum, the substance of reforms remains weak. An ongoing constitutional crisis, systematic campaigns against civil society, and entrenched nationalism reveal a troubling picture. Implementation of the Growth Plan Reform Agenda and the Accession Programme has been partial at best, while the roadmap to close all chapters by the end of 2026 is overly ambitious. External engagements, particularly the agreement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), raise further doubts about Montenegro's consistency with EU norms. The following analysis explores these trends through documented events and underlines the need for a time-bound, rule-of-law-based fast-track accession of Montenegro — a goal that can be reached only by strengthening justice.

## Relations with the EU

Montenegro's accession negotiations appeared to gain momentum in June 2024 with the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR, 2024), which confirmed that benchmarks in Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights)

and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) had been met, thereby allowing Montenegro to continue closing chapters. This procedural green light culminated on 16 December 2024 in the provisional closure of three chapters<sup>1</sup>, marking the first such closures since 2017<sup>2</sup>. The sequencing held political significance: for the first time in seven years, Podgorica could claim a tangible negotiating milestone. Yet the optics masked more difficult constraints. Although Chapter 31 on Foreign, Security and Defence Policy was deemed technically ready, Croatia blocked its provisional closure, citing unresolved bilateral issues, including the naval training ship “Jadran” and grievances triggered by Montenegro’s June 2024 parliamentary resolution on Jasenovac and other WWII camps. Croatia’s position turned a technical chapter into a political lever – underlining how bilateral disputes can re-intervene, even late in the accession process.

A second symbolic win followed in June 2025, when Montenegro provisionally closed Chapter 5 on Public Procurement. Domestically, this was framed as proof that the “engine is on” across the fundamentals cluster. Yet the victory is vulnerable: the government’s agreement with the UAE – if implemented with sweeping exemptions from procurement and competition rules, as currently formulated – raises serious concerns regarding alignment with EU rules and standards under Chapter 5. In other words, the country’s external deals risk eroding the very compliance that allowed Chapter 5 to close – an inconsistency Brussels has already flagged (Council of the European Union, 2025, p. 1).

The Government adopted new action plans for Chapters 23 and 24 in early May 2025 and presented them as evidence of renewed commitment to the rule of law. While the documents cover activities up to the June 2024 “closing benchmarks”, much of the content reiterates earlier obligations

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 7 (Intellectual Property Law), Chapter 10 (Information Society & Media), and Chapter 20 (Enterprise and Industrial Policy).

<sup>2</sup> When Chapter 30 (External Relations) was provisionally closed.

and relies on weak political sponsorship and uneven sequencing. The implementation gap became more visible as the constitutional crisis deepened. In its Rule of Law Report of 8 July 2025, the European Commission observed that tensions arose when Parliament attempted to force the retirement of a Constitutional Court judge in a manner it considered unconstitutional, thereby undermining guarantees of judicial independence (European Commission, 2025). The episode exposed two systemic vulnerabilities: first, the readiness of political actors to instrumentalise institutional rules for short-term gain; second, the limited capacity of checks-and-balances to correct course swiftly.

Electoral reform is frequently showcased as a success story; in reality it remains partial. Technical amendments – on deadlines and procedures, and with some adjustments to gender-balance requirements while women remain structurally disadvantaged in the electoral process – were adopted. However, core issues, such as the accuracy and transparency of the voter register, the introduction of open lists, and stronger campaign-finance controls, were left largely untouched. The European Commission’s 2024 report had already concluded that the “overall electoral framework requires a comprehensive revision” – a sentiment Brussels maintained throughout 2025 while welcoming incremental fixes. The implication is straightforward: the amendments improve the mechanics but fall short of ensuring fully fair and transparent elections.

In terms of reform delivery, the government’s roadmap to close additional chapters by the end of 2025 remained largely aspirational. The government fulfilled 92% of its EU accession obligations in the first half of last year, but has only managed to meet 65% over the current year, prompting criticism over its inability to meet minimal expectations amid growing concerns about political priorities (Vijesti, 2025). Under the EU Growth Plan, Montenegro received 26.8 million EUR in initial pre-financing in May 2025, but in the second tranche it was awarded only 10.2 million EUR instead of the

expected 18 million EUR. The European Commission confirmed that seven measures had been fully implemented, while another seven were merely initiated and not completed by the deadline, leading to a reduced disbursement. According to the government's official reporting, by 30 June 2025, Montenegro had completed 11 of 18 reform steps under the Growth Plan Reform Agenda (Government of Montenegro, 2025).

Taken together, the period from September 2024 to September 2025 confirms a dual reality: Montenegro can still move – but only as fast as it can credibly bring about reforms at home, effectively manage bilateral politics, and align its external engagements with EU norms. The immediate test case for this credibility remains the closure of Chapters 23 and 24.

Yet, despite numerous problems and the evident stagnation of the enlargement process, neither side — the EU and Montenegro — can afford for this situation to last indefinitely. Therefore, one of the possible ways forward would be to introduce a time-bound accession path for Montenegro, tied explicitly to measurable rule-of-law progress. Such an approach would restore mutual trust, incentivise genuine reforms, and re-establish the EU's transformative leverage in the region (Marović, 2025).

## **Internal dialogue on the EU**

Domestically, Montenegro remains in deep political and institutional crisis. The unconstitutional dismissal of a Constitutional Court judge epitomises the fragility of the checks and balances system. Instead of strengthening judicial independence, political actors have entrenched control over appointments.

Nationalism has intensified, fuelled by disputes over relations with Serbia, the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), and identity politics. This polarisation is not merely rhetorical; it obstructs parliamentary consensus on reforms and diverts attention from alignment with

EU standards. Far from episodic, nationalism is becoming a structural barrier to accession. A striking example came in June 2025, when a monument to Pavle Đurišić, a WWII Chetnik commander implicated in war crimes, was erected on private land in the Berane municipality. The ceremony was not only attended locally but explicitly endorsed by the top leadership of the SOC, including the Metropolitan, thereby lending institutional legitimacy to the rehabilitation of figures fundamentally incompatible with European memory politics.

Friction between coalition partners in power has intensified at the local level. Speculation about government reconstruction, openly discussed by ruling figures in the summer of 2025, further demonstrated the fragility of the parliamentary majority. Instead of focusing on reform delivery, political elites remain absorbed in intra-coalition bargaining, diverting political energy away from accession-related priorities.

Civil society organisations, which have always been a strong pillar of Montenegro's EU path, have come under systematic attack. Smear campaigns, threats, and the public delegitimisation of activists reflect a deliberate strategy to silence watchdogs. This shrinking civic space undermines democratic resilience and reduces the credibility of the accession process. The pressure intensified with targeted campaigns against Tea Gorjanc Prelević (Human Rights Action) and Aleksandar Dragičević (activist), which drew condemnation from domestic and international actors as ruling-party figures personalised attacks rather than addressing substantive critiques. These were not isolated incidents but part of a wider climate in which critical voices – lawyers, journalists, and public-interest advocates – are treated as adversaries rather than partners. The pattern matters for accession: if civic oversight is delegitimised and rushed “solutions” bypass proper law-making, credibility of the fundamentals erodes.

## Relations with other international actors

Montenegro's external engagements during this period reveal contradictions between its EU aspirations and its broader foreign policy. The agreements illustrate a broader strategic tension. The government claims the texts are compatible with the Constitution and the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), and that practical outcomes will depend on implementation. Yet the European Commission and watchdogs have highlighted that explicit exemptions from procurement, tender, and competition rules could enable direct awards and undercut acquis-consistent market discipline – precisely the standards Montenegro must internalise before accession. Unless implemented to hard-wire EU-compliant safeguards, these agreements risk becoming negative test cases of “what not to do” under Chapters 5 and 8 (and, indirectly, Chapter 23 via corruption-risk exposure).

Montenegro has continued to align with EU sanctions against Russia, but enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly in the area of financial flows and money laundering. This selective application raises questions about the depth of its political commitment to aligning with EU foreign policy. In mid-2025, while negotiations with Croatia on bilateral disputes were still ongoing, Zagreb issued another diplomatic protest note to Podgorica in response to an act of Montenegro's Ministry of Defense concerning the insignia of the ship “Jadran” (HRT English, 2025).

Montenegro's difficulties in aligning its visa policy with the EU have also become a focal issue in Brussels. Despite repeated commitments, Podgorica has maintained a divergent regime with visa-free entry for several third-country nationals, including those from regions under EU sanctions. In its 2024 and 2025 reports, the European Commission explicitly noted that full visa-policy alignment is not only a technical requirement but also a political test of Montenegro's willingness to uphold the integrity of the EU's external borders. This issue also falls under Montenegro's obligations defined in the Reform Agenda within the framework of

the EU Growth Plan. Moreover, the European Parliament, in its June 2025 resolution, insisted that Montenegro urgently harmonise its visa regime, warning that credibility in CFSP alignment is directly linked to this measure.

Relations with the United States and NATO are more stable, with Montenegro contributing to Alliance activities on the eastern flank and maintaining regular political dialogue.

## Conclusion

Montenegro's accession trajectory illustrates the limits of procedural progress without substantive reform. Chapter closures in 2024 and 2025 indicate that the country can still register formal movement when opportunities arise, but these gains are swiftly discounted by bilateral blockages and domestic institutional crises. The rule-of-law fundamentals – Chapters 23 and 24 – remain the core bottleneck. Weak implementation capacity, evidenced by the mid-2025 slowdown and uneven ministerial performance, exposes the government's own timelines as unrealistic, while the conditionality of the Growth Plan makes under-delivery financially costly. External engagements further amplify internal weaknesses: opaque agreements with the UAE undercut acquis alignment, visa-policy misalignment directly challenges Schengen credibility, and Croatia's escalating bilateral disputes risk hardening into vetoes.

The combination of fragile institutions, resurgent nationalism, shrinking civic space, and selective policy delivery renders Montenegro's European path increasingly precarious. Each of these dynamics erodes the credibility of its reform narrative and undermines the EU's core conditions. Unless Podgorica demonstrates both political will and institutional capacity to reverse these trends, Brussels will continue to reward procedure rather than substance, and Montenegro's accession will remain vulnerable, reversible, and ultimately stalled.

Yet, the roadmap endorsed by the EU for closing chapters by 2026 still offers an opportunity. If Montenegro uses the remainder of this European Commission's mandate to accelerate reforms in justice, anti-corruption, and civic freedoms, and to resolve bilateral disputes through dialogue, it could still transform procedural momentum into substantive progress. Also, as has been highlighted and suggested, there is a mechanism through the accession treaty and post-accession mechanisms for Montenegro to join in 2028 or 2029, which is why the focus should be on the rule of law. The window is narrow, but the chance to progress forward remains within reach – provided political will matches institutional ambition.

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# NORTH MACEDONIA

Dimitar Nikolovski

## **The formal state of EU-North Macedonia relations (September 2024 - September 2025)**

The past year has been dominated by the aftermath of North Macedonia's June 2024 elections, which brought to power a VMRO-DPMNE-led government under Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski. The new leadership pledged to keep the EU path open but firmly resisted amending the constitution to include the Bulgarian minority without prior guarantees from Sofia or Brussels. This hardened position has reshaped the country's dialogue with Brussels.

The autumn of 2024 was marked by a series of high-level contacts. In mid-September, Mickoski traveled to Brussels for a work visit that included a lunch with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, alongside other Western Balkan leaders, as well as bilateral meetings with European Council President Charles Michel, Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, and DG NEAR Director-General Gert Jan Koopman. The prime minister used these meetings to reiterate his stance that accession should be based on reforms and achievements rather than on bilateral conditions – a position that set the tone for the year ahead (Government of North Macedonia, 2024).

In late October, von der Leyen visited Skopje as part of her Western Balkans tour, meeting Mickoski and President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. At their joint press conference, she stressed both the promise of the new Growth

Plan – including pre-financing for priority projects – and the necessity of constitutional amendments to open the Fundamentals cluster (European Commission, 2024a). The year ended with North Macedonia's participation in the EU–Western Balkans Summit in Brussels in December 2024. Mickoski joined other regional leaders in discussions on enlargement momentum and the Growth Plan. The summit underscored the EU's renewed geopolitical interest in the region, but again delivered no concrete movement in accession (Macedonian Information Agency, 2024).

2025 began with preparations for the 23rd meeting of the EU–North Macedonia Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC). In January and again in early February 2025, members of the European Parliament's delegation met in Brussels with officials from DG NEAR and the European External Action Service to coordinate positions and draft the agenda (European Parliament Delegation, 2025a). This culminated in the JPC session held in Skopje on 27–28 February 2025. Government representatives, MEPs, and Commission officials discussed a wide array of topics, including rule of law, corruption, media freedom, civil society engagement, neighbourhood relations, infrastructure, and the environment. The meeting concluded with the adoption of joint recommendations, reaffirming the importance of parliamentary dialogue, even in the absence of formal chapter openings (European Parliament Delegation, 2025b).

The political highlight of the spring was the visit of EU High Representative and Vice-President Kaja Kallas to Skopje on 23 May 2025. She met with Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski and other government officials, urging them to take “era-defining decisions” to advance accession, particularly in relation to the constitutional amendment concerning the Bulgarian minority. While the atmosphere was cordial, the Macedonian side maintained its insistence that Bulgaria must first offer guarantees of support before constitutional changes could be considered (European Union, External Action, 2025).

Momentum shifted in early summer, when North Macedonia hosted the Western Balkans leaders' meeting in Skopje on 30 June and 1 July 2025. The gathering brought together the prime ministers and presidents of the six Western Balkan partners with EU Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos. Prime Minister Mickoski held a bilateral meeting with Commissioner Kos on 30 June, focusing on the EU Growth Plan and the reform agenda. The next day, the leaders' summit formally reaffirmed their collective commitment to the swift delivery of the Growth Plan. Commissioner Kos's opening remarks, the bilateral talks, and the joint press conference all demonstrated the EU's effort to keep enlargement and economic convergence on the political agenda, even amid unresolved political blockages (European Commission, 2025a).

Shortly afterwards, in July 2025, the European Parliament plenary debated and adopted a resolution on North Macedonia that explicitly cited the outcomes of the JPC meeting in Skopje, ensuring that parliamentary diplomacy fed into the EU's formal political positions. This resolution was marred by the controversies regarding the non-inclusion of specific references to "Macedonian identity and language", which was halted through amendments supported by the majority of MEPs (European Parliament, 2025b).

On 30 July 2025, the European Commission followed up on the Growth Plan by authorising the first release of funds to North Macedonia under the Reform and Growth Facility. While not a meeting in the strict sense, this decision was directly connected to the summit in Skopje and symbolised the link between political dialogue and financial commitments (European Commission, 2025c).

In parallel with these meetings, the EU decided to decouple North Macedonia's accession process from that of Albania in September 2024, citing the unresolved constitutional issue. This move underscored the fragility of enlargement momentum and heightened frustration in Skopje. Mickoski's subsequent description of the EU's demands as "humiliating" captured the mood of his government and

set a confrontational tone for public discourse (Balkan Insight, 2024b).

Yet, despite these multiple touchpoints, the accession process itself did not move forward. Since the opening of negotiations in July 2022, North Macedonia has completed the technical screening of all clusters, but as of September 2025, not a single chapter has been opened. The constitutional question remains the decisive barrier. The EU's Growth Plan provided some tangible benefits, including a 60 million EUR loan guarantee for small businesses and new investments in digital infrastructure – but its full potential has been constrained by political blockages, the EC's failure to meet its own deadlines, and limited administrative capacity (Interview with Hristina Konevska Berovska – state advisor at the Ministry of European Affairs).

With an Implementing Decision, the European Commission approved the first release of funds to North Macedonia under the Reform and Growth Instrument for the Western Balkans. The country received around 2.3 million EUR in grants, 2 million EUR in loans via the Western Balkans Investment Framework, and 3.7 million EUR in direct budget support. An additional 3.6 million EUR was set aside to settle earlier pre-financing. The reforms covered public finance management, energy transition, state-owned company governance, and rule of law measures.

The European Commission confirmed that two steps were fully completed: the adoption of the Public Internal Financial Control Law and amendments to the Company Law – representing 40% of measures and 50% of allocated funds. For the remaining steps, a grace period until December 2026 was granted, leaving room for the release of the rest of the 17.1 million EUR package (European Commission, 2025b).

Taken together, the meetings and initiatives of the past year reflect enduring engagement but no breakthrough. Brussels has kept North Macedonia firmly on its agenda, increasing financial support and deploying the language

of geopolitics. Skopje has remained rhetorically committed to integration while resisting concessions viewed as undermining sovereignty. The result is a holding pattern: active dialogue, new resources, but no chapters opened and no resolution of the central obstacle in EU–North Macedonia relations.

### **Internal dialogue on the EU**

First of all, despite the setbacks and feelings of betrayal by the EU, Macedonian citizens remain firmly in support of EU membership. According to a survey conducted by IRI in May–June 2025, 70% said that they would vote positively if a referendum on joining the EU were held (European Western Balkans, 2025), a number confirmed by the Special Eurobarometer in September 2025 (European Commission, 2025c). A worrying trend, however, was revealed among the youth, in a survey conducted by the European Centre for Excellence: only 41% had positive attitudes towards the EU, while 46.5 % said they do not believe North Macedonia will ever become an EU member.

The internal dialogue on the European Union in North Macedonia during the past year has reflected both the persistence of pro-European sentiment across large segments of society and a deepening frustration with what many perceive as unfair or excessive conditions imposed by Brussels. Parliamentary debates, party statements, and public discourse all revolved around a single focal point: the constitutional amendment required to enshrine the Bulgarian minority as part of the framework for continued accession. This issue dominated political life, framing nearly every conversation about the EU and generating sharper dividing lines between parties, civil society actors, and citizens.

Within parliament, the ruling coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE made clear from the outset that it would not accept what it referred to as “humiliating conditions”. Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski consistently framed the constitutional

amendment as an imposition that undermined national sovereignty. He insisted that Bulgaria should first provide binding guarantees of support for North Macedonia's EU membership before Skopje made any concessions. Furthermore, VMRO-DPMNE accepted the constitutional changes, but only after membership negotiations were finalised. This framing resonated with his electoral base, which had rewarded him in June 2024 with a parliamentary majority on a platform that promised to resist foreign dictates while keeping the EU path formally open. For VMRO-DPMNE, the EU remains a strategic goal, but the process is now seen through the lens of defending national dignity and resisting bilateral blackmail (Telma, 2025).

In contrast, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), now in opposition, continued to advocate a pragmatic pro-EU approach. Its leaders argued that constitutional reform, though painful, was necessary to unlock the next stages of accession. They warned that delay would leave the country in a geopolitical limbo, risking isolation while neighbouring states moved ahead (Vistinomer, 2024).

Smaller parties added their own inflections to the debate. The Albanian parties – notably, DUI, Alliance for Albanians, and others – remained staunchly pro-European and supportive of constitutional changes. They emphasised that integration into the EU is essential for securing minority rights, promoting economic development, and guaranteeing stability. For them, the dispute with Bulgaria was secondary to the strategic imperative of EU membership, and they criticised the new government for holding the process hostage to nationalist politics (Libertas, 2024). On the other end of the spectrum, more radical or Eurosceptic voices, though limited in size, amplified public doubts. These actors, such as pro-Russian parties Rodina and United Macedonia, stressed the costs of compliance with EU regulations, the risk of identity erosion, and the possibility of alternative partnerships, particularly with non-Western powers (Meta.mk, 2024).

Beyond parliament, the national debate has been equally polarised. Civil society organisations, think tanks, and pro-European NGOs highlighted the opportunities offered by the Growth Plan and the risks of stagnation. Many pointed to concrete projects – such as digital infrastructure investments and enterprise support schemes – as evidence that the EU remained committed despite political blockages. At the same time, some of these actors echoed concerns that enlargement fatigue in Brussels could indefinitely delay accession regardless of Skopje’s concessions, fueling further skepticism.

The media landscape amplified the divides. Pro-government outlets largely mirrored VMRO-DPMNE’s line, portraying the EU as a partner but also as a demanding actor whose conditions threatened national identity. Opposition and independent media tended to stress the strategic costs of resisting constitutional change and warned of isolation.

Several episodes highlighted the volatility of the discourse. The prime minister’s September 2024 declaration that EU demands were “humiliating” set the tone for the year and triggered a wave of debates across society (Balkan Insight, 2024a). In May 2025, the visit of EU High Representative Kaja Kallas brought the issue back to the forefront, with the government doubling down on its refusal to change the constitution (Reuters, 2025). The June 2025 Western Balkans leaders’ meeting in Skopje briefly shifted the discussion towards economic opportunities under the Growth Plan, but the underlying tension quickly reemerged as the constitutional question remained unresolved. Each of these events revealed the pattern of the national debate: enthusiasm for the EU’s material benefits coupled with resistance to political concessions were perceived as a threat to identity.

Overall, the internal dialogue in North Macedonia reveals a paradox. Support for EU membership remains high in opinion polls, and most parties – including the governing VMRO-DPMNE – still declare European integration as

a strategic orientation. Yet the discourse is increasingly dominated by narratives of resistance, humiliation, and conditionality fatigue. The risk is that the pro-European consensus becomes narrower and more conditional, particularly if concrete accession steps continue to be delayed. In this context, the EU's ability to demonstrate tangible benefits through the Growth Plan may help maintain support, but the central dilemma – how to reconcile national identity with external conditionality – remains unresolved and continues to shape the tone of the country's political and public debates.

### **Expert reflections from the region**

The past year of EU–North Macedonia relations illustrate both the persistence of the enlargement framework and its vulnerability to political blockages. From a regional perspective, what stands out most is the paradox between the EU's renewed “geopolitical turn” towards the Western Balkans and the absence of concrete movement in Skopje's accession process. The EU has invested considerable energy in presenting enlargement as a strategic necessity in the face of global competition and regional instability. Yet, for North Macedonia, the reality remains one of endurance rather than acceleration. Screening has been completed, financial instruments such as the Growth Plan are being deployed, and high-level visits are frequent, but the single precondition of constitutional reform continues to prevent the formal opening of negotiation chapters. This gap between rhetoric and institutional progress defines the experience of North Macedonia in 2024–2025.

The “geopolitical narrative” has nevertheless introduced new dynamics. First, it has raised the profile of the Western Balkans in Brussels, ensuring that North Macedonia remains on the EU's political agenda despite enlargement fatigue among member states. Second, it has enabled the Commission and Council to justify the Growth

Plan as a forward-looking instrument, offering a preview of the benefits of integration before membership. In North Macedonia, the promise of closer ties to the single market, increased investment, and enhanced regional connectivity has been welcomed by many stakeholders, especially in the business sector. These tangible incentives represent a shift from purely normative arguments about values and reforms to material benefits that can be communicated to citizens. For a country where public support for EU membership remains high but increasingly fragile, this shift is important.

At the same time, the limitations of the geopolitical approach are evident. The EU's narrative has not overcome the structural problem posed by bilateral disputes. For North Macedonia, the constitutional requirement linked to Bulgaria remains an obstacle. No amount of geopolitical rhetoric can substitute for the political will necessary to secure a two-thirds parliamentary majority for constitutional change. In this sense, enlargement continues to be hostage to domestic politics and concerns over future bilateral vetoes, undermining the credibility of the EU's claim of acting strategically. The government's insistence that Bulgaria must first provide guarantees before any constitutional changes are made only reinforces this stalemate.

Another challenge lies in the domestic discourse itself. As described in the previous section, pro-European arguments are increasingly framed defensively, while narratives of humiliation and imposed conditions are gaining strength. This trend risks transforming EU membership from a broadly shared aspiration into a partisan and identity-driven debate. The geopolitical turn has therefore not eliminated Eurosceptic rhetoric; if anything, it has provided new ground for populist claims that North Macedonia is being treated unfairly despite its long record of concessions. This further creates a vacuum which may be filled by illiberal international actors, such as China or Russia.

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# SERBIA

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## Relations with the EU

Serbia–EU relations have long been challenging, shaped by the EU’s demanding political conditions and Serbia’s slow progress in meeting them. Serbia began its EU integration in the early 2000s, joining the Stabilisation and Association Process, gaining candidate status in 2012, and launching accession talks in 2014, following progress in the dialogue with Pristina.

Accession negotiations have lasted for over a decade, resulting in 22 opened chapters and only two provisionally closed. While between 4 and 6 chapters were opened per year until 2019 (two in 2015), the process has visibly slowed, with only two chapters opened in 2019, and none in 2020. The 2020 negotiating methodology proposed by the Commission, which clustered the chapters, did not expedite the process. From 2021 to September 2025, Serbia has opened only one additional cluster (Cluster IV – Green Deal and Sustainable Connectivity). Although the Commission recommended opening Cluster III (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth), the Council found that the fulfilment of technical conditions was not sufficient – unofficially, also due to a lack of alignment in other areas.

Despite the 2022 constitutional reforms aimed at improving the judiciary’s independence and the adoption of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy for 2024–2028, Serbia still faces challenges regarding the “fundamentals” of the process, including the effectiveness of the rule of law system and media regulation. Meanwhile, the 2025 Rule of

Law Report finds that “Political pressure on the judiciary and the prosecution services remained high” (European Commission, 2025a, p. 2). Key judicial and prosecution offices still suffer from inadequate capacities and an unclear legal framework. There is a notable absence of a consistent track record in investigations, indictments, and final convictions in high-level corruption cases. Furthermore, exemptions from public procurement laws (through bilateral intergovernmental agreements and special laws) have become increasingly common, undermining efforts to combat corruption effectively.

The December 2023 parliamentary and local elections in Serbia raised additional concerns regarding the regularity of the electoral process, prompting the European Parliament to call for an independent investigation, as suspicions of electoral fraud may have impacted election results and undermined their legitimacy. The EP even called for the possible suspension of EU funds to Serbia if the allegations of electoral fraud were confirmed.

The Council’s effective holdup of negotiations, despite no formal suspension, also stems from Serbia’s weak alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which has become a significant point of contention between Serbia and the EU following Russia’s war against Ukraine. While Serbia has aligned with UN resolutions condemning Russia’s aggression, it has not aligned with any EU restrictive measures. The Commission noted backsliding in the CFSP in the 2022 progress report, with “no progress” observed in 2023 and 2024.

The major bone of contention, however, between the EU and Serbia is the status of Kosovo. Five out of 27 EU member states have not recognised Kosovo’s independence, but they agree on the necessity of normalising relations between the two sides. The EU became involved as a mediator in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, making the comprehensive normalisation of relations—sealed with a legally binding agreement—a key priority for Serbia’s accession process.

This goal has become part of Serbia's negotiating Chapter 35, emphasised in the Council's Negotiating Framework.

Apart from these critical issues, Serbia is making slow progress across virtually all negotiating chapters. According to Serbia's own quarterly reports on fulfilling harmonisation plans (i.e. the National Program for the Adoption of EU Acquis – NPAA), success has remained very modest, despite regular amendments and adjustments to the plans. The report for the first quarter of 2025 states that “NPAA, observing the regulations planned for adoption from the third quarter of 2024 until the first quarter of 2025, have been fulfilled at 32% (41/130)” (Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, 2025a). Despite this, in April 2025, the Government adopted yet another Plan for fulfilling the most important obligations from the accession negotiations of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union by the end of 2026 (Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, 2025b).

EU–Serbia relations have entered a new phase following the deepening political and institutional crisis in Serbia after the onset of student-led protests in November 2024. The protests were sparked by the tragic collapse of the canopy at the newly renovated train station in Novi Sad, which resulted in the loss of 16 lives. The reconstruction of the railway station in Novi Sad was part of a project based on the bilateral Serbia–China agreement and was therefore exempt from the Law on Public Procurement and hidden from the broader public. The tensions quickly escalated within the country after Serbia's authorities publicly lied about the train station reconstruction, and the ruling party's officials attacked the peacefully protesting students. Suspecting corruption and misconduct during the construction works, protesters outlined several demands, mostly connected to the rule of law and justice (i.e. publishing documents related to the reconstruction of the train station, and punishing those responsible for attacking the students). After several months, protesters further demanded a snap election, while the authorities responded by increasing violence against

the protesters (including the use of a long-range acoustic device) and arresting more than 920 persons since November 2024 (Pustite ih sve, 2025).

EU officials have been mostly cautious in their dealings with the situation, avoiding open criticism and accounts of the crisis and its ensuing events. The rhetoric towards Serbian authorities only slightly changed, with several MEPs being the most critical, followed by more cautious Commission officials and almost entirely silent Council representatives. On the other hand, in April 2025, Marta Kos stated that “what the demonstrators are demanding from the Serbian government is the same as what the European Commission is requiring Serbia to fulfil in the negotiation process” (Beta, 2025). In September 2025, the Renew Europe group in the European Parliament nominated Serbian students for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

In the meantime, Serbia, although stalled in formal accession negotiations, continued to cooperate with the EU and progress in “phasing-in”, i.e. in a gradual integration process allowing the country to participate in certain EU policies and programmes before membership. In July 2024, the European Commission and Serbia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a Strategic Partnership on sustainable raw materials, battery value chains, and electric vehicles. In May 2025, Serbia became part of the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), meaning that it had harmonised the relevant legislation and deepened integration in the financial services area and digital connectivity.

Over the course of its two-decade-long integration process, Serbia has benefited from various EU funds. Currently, it benefits from the Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA), with roughly 200 million EUR annually. Nevertheless, IPA III (2021–2027) has not considerably increased the available funds compared to IPA II (2014–2020), while the real value may have even decreased due to inflation. Serbia’s budget, on the other hand, has nearly doubled in size from 2014 (8 billion EUR) to 2024 (around 18 billion EUR). As

a result, the IPA share now constitutes an even smaller contribution to the state budget.

The Reform and Growth Facility (RGF) (2024–2027) was adopted in May 2024 as part of the EU Growth Plan for the WBs to support the reforms and socio-economic convergence of these countries, with an additional 6 billion EUR (4 billion EUR in loans and 2 billion EUR in grants) (Council of the European Union, 2024). By 2027, Serbia is expected to receive 1.58 billion EUR in grants and loans from this facility, provided that the country implements the 98 measures outlined across the four thematic areas listed in its Reform Agenda. Despite the evident democratic backsliding and ongoing crisis in the country, in June 2025, Serbia received 51.7 million EUR in concessional loans, while 59 million EUR of grants and loans were to be transferred through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), as the 7% pre-financing envisaged by the Growth Plan. Currently, the Commission is evaluating the implementation of reforms necessary for further payments, specifically those related to the “Fundamentals”, business environment, and Green and Digital policies. According to the Scoreboard of the RGF, Serbia has not achieved a single step planned in the Reform Agenda, and consequently, no funds have been released so far (European Commission, 2025c).

### **Internal dialogue on the EU**

The internal dialogue in Serbia regarding EU integration is almost non-existent, which, over the years, has affected public attitudes towards the EU. The available media clipping surveys indicate that EU integration is underrepresented and depoliticised in Serbian media. Official political communication regarding the EU is lacking in transparency and public consultation. Academic research on media reporting on the EU in Serbia reveals that the tone of coverage has become increasingly critical and sensational in recent years, with tabloid press and highly viewed commercial

pro-regime TV stations disseminating misinformation and citing unverified sources to cover issues related to EU integration. Discourses on the EU are strongly influenced by governing elites and government-controlled media, which often employ mixed messages for blame-shifting regarding the stalled accession process.

Public opinion in Serbia regarding EU integration and membership has been surveyed on numerous occasions by various public institutions, non-governmental organisations, higher education and research institutes, and private companies. A longitudinal comparison of these surveys reveals a decline in public support for Serbia's EU membership from 2009 to 2025, with current support falling below 40%. The Spring 2025 Eurobarometer found that only 34% of respondents in Serbia believe that EU membership would be a good thing (European Commission, 2025b), making Serbia the most Eurosceptic country in the WBs. The decrease of support for EU membership can be attributed to various factors, including perceptions of the unfair EU membership conditionality, particularly related to the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue on normalisation of relations; scepticism about the EU's interest in lithium mining in Serbia; disillusionment with Serbia's prospects of joining the EU; as well as the war in Ukraine and related EU conditions regarding restrictive measures toward Russia.

More recent sources of scepticism stem from the unmet expectations of former Euroenthusiasts who believed the EU would withdraw its support for Serbia's authoritarian regime and begin backing the opposing voices promoting European values and norms. Over time, Serbian society has become increasingly polarised, which was also visible in the student-led protests that have lasted for almost 11 months. Liberal, pro-EU citizens have been walking the streets side by side with nationalists, united around their call for justice, the rule of law, and ousting the corrupt government. In such an atmosphere, there was no room for debate on EU integration, and almost no EU flag could

be seen among the protesters. Despite this, a group of students took a bike trip to Strasbourg while another ran a 2,000 km relay ultramarathon from Novi Sad to Brussels to raise awareness about the situation in Serbia, both within EU and Council of Europe institutions, as well as in the cities and states along their route. At the same time, the Serbian authorities and government-controlled media have been placing the narrative about protesters as “terrorists”, and protests as being organised and supported from abroad, attempting a “colour revolution” and wishing for a “Serbian Maidan”. These narratives have been backed by Russian officials and intelligence services publicly stating that the protests in Serbia are “largely the product of subversive activities by the European Union (EU) and its member states”, and that the anniversary of the Novi Sad tragedy on 1 November will be used by the “Euro-elite [...] to turn the situation in its favor” (European Western Balkans, 2025).

### **Expert voice from the region**

The complex relationship between Serbia and the EU has been characterised by slow advancements, with the accession negotiations dragging on for more than a decade. To date, 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened, and only two have been closed. This modest result reflects both Serbia’s difficulties (and sometimes unwillingness) in meeting the stringent conditions, as well as the EU’s reluctance to proceed with enlargement. The slowdown in the Western Balkans’ enlargement process has been evident since the Juncker Commission’s announcement that no enlargements would occur during its term. The issue was largely absent from the EU agenda until 2018, when a new enlargement strategy aimed to restore credibility by highlighting the EU’s geostrategic interests in the region. Despite attempts to unify EU member states and the introduction of a new enlargement methodology in 2020/21, progress remains

slow, indicating that merely changing negotiation techniques is insufficient.

Serbia's non-alignment with EU policies, particularly in areas such as the rule of law, media regulation, and its adherence to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, as well as its relations with Russia, have been a source of concern. Issues surrounding Serbia's electoral process, including suspicions of fraud that may have impacted election results, have raised alarm within the European Parliament, leading MEPs to question the justification for Serbia remaining a candidate country and a beneficiary of EU funds. Another difficult issue in Serbia-EU relations has been the status of Kosovo and the EU's conditionality towards Serbia in this regard. The EU's insistence on including more specific obligations in Serbia's negotiating Chapter 35, which is perceived as a *de facto* recognition of Kosovo's independence, makes the continuation of Serbia's EU accession process very difficult, if not impossible, pushing the country further away from the EU.

New financial instruments, such as the Reform and Growth Facility, provide Serbia with short-term opportunities to enact necessary reforms and promote socio-economic convergence. However, it remains to be seen whether Serbia will meet the conditions required for funding. So far (November 2025), no progress has been recorded in fulfilling the steps to implement the Reform Agenda, a prerequisite for the release of funds. The new instrument is again tailored in accordance with the well-known elite-driven approach, with governmental institutions developing the reform agenda and proposing the projects to be funded. The very adoption process of this comprehensive document was marked with deficiencies, clearly lacking the substantial involvement of civil society and public debate, despite this being one of the declared demands by the Commission. Due to short deadlines for its adoption and objective obstacles on both sides, such as EP elections and the change of government in Serbia, the Commission was satisfied

that the document was drafted and approved it shortly afterwards, despite objections from civil society. It could be argued that the Serbian administration is highly capable of producing documents and legislation, but significant challenges remain in implementation and enforcement. This is confirmed by the creation of yet another Plan for fulfilling the most important obligations from the accession negotiations of the Republic of Serbia to the European Union by the end of 2026, even though other similar plans have not been fulfilled. Given the existence of the regularly updated NPAA and numerous other accession-related documents, the purpose if this document appears rather unclear, aside from enabling the Government to issue another declarative act aimed at persuading the EU that it is progressing in the accession process.

On the other hand, there appears to be an understanding within the EU that it must first undergo internal reform before any enlargement can occur, with a consensus on these reforms still distant. In this sense, in an optimistic scenario, the EU could be ready for enlargement by 2030, unless it opts for a smaller-scale enlargement involving one or two Western Balkan countries, such as Montenegro or Albania, in the meantime. Geopolitical urgency, which rapidly brought the Eastern Partnership countries under the enlargement policy framework in 2022, has not accelerated the process for Serbia, despite (or perhaps because of) the competing influence of Russia in this candidate country, which could present a destabilising factor. In the meantime, while Serbian authorities complain to their Russian partners about the “colored revolution” and ensuing “Maidan in Serbia, supported by the West”, the EU keeps silent, refraining from openly interfering in the country’s most profound socio-political crisis in over two decades. Instead of focusing on societal transformation, the EU’s emphasis on regional stability through an elite-driven approach has resulted in its long-term support for leaders deemed capable of delivering results, even when their democratic credentials are



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# CONCLUSIONS

Over the last year, the political dynamics in the region, both in terms of relations with the EU and at the national level, have remained high. Cyclical visits of highly ranked EU officials, intended to encourage the implementation of the Growth Plan, aim to motivate beneficiaries to further align with the EU membership conditions. Although, as visible from the contributions, the Growth Plan has the potential to impact political behaviour, it continues to fall short of bringing tangible improvements to reforms that would bring these countries closer to membership.

Within the analysed period, certain trends can be observed. Serbia has lost its position as a key EU partner in the enlargement process. President Vučić's inability to effectively address the almost year-long domestic protests has forced the EU and some member states to interact with Belgrade more cautiously. Notably, Vučić did not hesitate to use force against the protesters and frame student demands for transparency, accountability and institutional effectiveness as an alleged Western plot against him. Despite the formal visits and signed lithium deal with Germany and the EU, Serbia's non-alignment with the European Common Foreign and Security policy, destabilisation attempts in Bosnia, Montenegro or most recently Moldova, the impact on North Macedonia, and the Russian presence and support against students protests have had a negative impact on relations between Belgrade and the EU.

Bosnia's continuous political limbo, caused by the removal of Milorad Dodik from office and the consistent sabotage of federal institutions by the Republica Srpska entity authorities, has de facto stalled the process of EU enlargement. Only recently, following the the removal of Dodik's SNSD veto, the Growth Plan was finally adopted by the Bosnia and Herzegovina Council of Ministers, offering a ray of

hope for the disbursement of EU funds to support reforms in Bosnia. Still, the fate of Bosnia's EU prospects seems to be determined more by Belgrade and Zagreb than by Sarajevo.

Over the last year, North Macedonian authorities devoted all their energy to undermining the provisions of the EU negotiation framework, particularly those requiring the recognition of Bulgarians among the minorities listed in the preamble of the Macedonian constitution. While the arguments surrounding an endangered national identity secured VMRO-DPMNE's landslide election victory, it practically paralysed North Macedonia's EU perspective. The decoupling from Albania left Skopje trapped with its own identity demons. Mickoski's government efforts to obtain additional guarantees in an effort to postpone the formal process of bringing Bulgarians to the preamble and seek renewed negotiations with Sofia remain unheard. More importantly, however, these efforts have contributed to a negative perception of the EU, which is silently blamed for the lack of progress.

In Kosovo, the EU's punitive measures imposed in 2023 following the crackdown on Kosovo's Serbs in Northern Kosovo had a tangible financial impact on Kosovo's reform capabilities. Only in June 2025 did the Commission decide to begin a gradual, conditional, and reversible lifting of these measures. Kosovo also faces an ongoing parliamentary crisis as Albin Kurti refuses to accept the new parliament's deputy speaker from the Serb ethnic minority party, the Serb List (Srpska Lista). While remaining the only country still awaiting formal candidate status, Albin Kurti's efforts to consolidate Kosovo's control on its territory and unwillingness to implement agreements concluded with Belgrade are met with scepticism both in Brussels and Washington.

Albania leveraged the decoupling from North Macedonia to distance itself not only from Skopje's identity problems, but also from the shadow of ex-Yugoslavia's problems, to which it was never linked. With the opening of 4 out of 6 clusters and 24 out of 35 negotiation chapters, along with

hosting further international initiatives, Tirana has now become a frontrunner and integration hub over the last year. Still, internal political dynamics and an unsatisfactory level of anti-corruption reforms constitute an important obstacle, regardless of the ambitious goal of 2027 membership.

Despite the declared determination to accomplish the negotiations process by the end of 2026, the government of Milojko Spaijć must balance an uneasy coalition with political partners who openly promote Russian and Serbian interests. The Prime Minister signed also the controversial Agreement on Cooperation in Tourism and Real Estate Development with the UAE, which raised concerns over the public procurement and the potential discrimination against European and Montenegrin companies. Furthermore, as the case of the naval training ship *Jadran* revealed, it is never too late to turn the technical process of closing chapters into a bilateral issue with a neighbouring EU member state. As the author of the contribution concluded, the combination of fragile institutions, resurgent nationalism, shrinking civic space, and selective policy delivery renders Montenegro's European path increasingly precarious.

Spasimir Domaradzki



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this policy paper was to monitor the developments in the interaction between the EU and the non-EU member states from the Balkans in the context of the “geopolitisation” of the EU enlargement policy. One tangible negative process that requires close consideration stems from the fact that in the EU-Serbian relations these geopolitical considerations seem to overshadow the long-underlined conditionality. This dualist approach turns against the EU in the form of hypocrisy allegations, reconfirming the ugly face of the EU stabilitocracy priorities in the Balkans.

Political developments over the past year in the WB6 reveal several trends. The EU’s applied strategy of nominal normative conditionality and substantial geopolitical rhetoric and actions brings ambiguous results. Most discouraging is the situation in Serbia, which not only abandoned any tangible efforts for membership, but also openly questions the political demands raised by citizens, which happen to be the same rule of law demands that the EU officially expects. By partnering solely with the political elites, the EU is losing Serbia’s citizens, discouraging pro-EU political and social forces and thus losing leverage in Serbia.

The EU should take its credibility in the Balkans seriously. If the EU wants to remain a reliable and normative factor in the Western Balkans, it must minimise cases of openly hypocritical positions in the region. The truck drivers’ protests in Bosnia highlighted the gap between the single market ideal and practical barriers. The EU’s silence on Vučić’s repressions undermines the values that Brussels claims to stand for. The punitive measures taken against Kurti’s actions provided a precedent that can be applied whenever authorities across the region oppress their people, as in Serbia. Loosening ties with leaders prone to authoritarian practices will send a clear message. A sense of

disappointment or accession fatigue remains visible across the region, demanding prompt and credible action.

While the Growth Plan has emerged as a key source of EU leverage, it is important to enhance its dynamics. Even if Bosnia's national plan serves as an extreme example, the EU needs to exert pressure on the prompt delivery of tangible reforms, which require appropriate publicity and visibility. This is especially significant since third parties achieve cheap visibility through agreements and alleged investments, as in the case of the UAE in Montenegro.

The EU perspective is no longer the only game in town. The next elections across the region reveal the existence of political formations openly questioning the pro-EU orientation of their countries. While they still remain a marginal minority, the longer the enlargement delays endure, the more vocal these voices will be.

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