THE EU'S GEOPOLITICAL TURN TOWARDS THE WESTERN BALKANS.

WHAT ABOUT THE PEOPLE?

POLICY PAPERS 03/2026

Copyright Instytut Europy Środkowej | Institute of Central Europe
ISBN 978-83-68760-18-7
Published and edited by
Instytut Europy Środkowej | Institute of Central Europe
ul. Niecała 5
20-080 Lublin, Poland
www.ies.lublin.pl
Cover design and typesetting Amadeusz Targoński
Print www.drukarniaakapit.pl

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INSTYTUT EUROPY ŚRODKOWEJ
INSTITUTE OF CENTRAL EUROPE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 7

ALBANIA 11
Jubjana Vila

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA 19
Nedžma Džananović

KOSOVO 33
Krenare Rushiti

MONTENEGRO 41
Jovana Marović

NORTH MACEDONIA 51
Dimitar Nikolovski

SERBIA 63
Ivana Radić Milosavljević

CONCLUSIONS 71
RECOMMENDATIONS 75
BIBLIOGRAPHY 77

INTRODUCTION

The prospect of including the Western Balkan states in further European Union enlargement remains one of the significant challenges for the future of the European project, and its importance appears to have increased considerably in recent years. For more than two decades, the prospect of EU membership has constituted one of the key reference points for the political, economic, and institutional transformation of the region. However, the significance of the enlargement process extends beyond the transformation of candidate countries themselves. In the current geopolitical environment, the integration of the Western Balkans has increasingly become a matter of security, stability, and the European Union's strategic position in its immediate neighbourhood.

This significance has become particularly evident amid growing international instability. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has fundamentally altered European perceptions of security and has once again highlighted the geopolitical importance of the Western Balkans. At the same time, growing US engagement in the Middle East, tensions in US–Iran relations and the resulting security crisis in the Middle East, along with China's expanding global presence and influence, have contributed to an increasingly complex international environment in which the European Union is compelled to reassess its strategic interests and its capacity to exert influence.

Against this background, the Western Balkans remain a region of particular importance for European stability. Geographically situated in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU, the region's political situation, security environment, and degree of integration into European political and economic structures have direct implications for the stability of southeastern Europe. The prospect of EU membership

remains one of the Union's most important instruments for influencing political developments in the region. Enlargement can therefore be understood not merely as a continuation of the EU's longstanding integration policy, but also as a means of strengthening the political and institutional resilience of the Western Balkan states, limiting the space for competing external influences, and consolidating the European security order.

Consequently, EU enlargement to the Western Balkans should be understood as a process in which three interrelated dimensions intersect: the domestic transformation of the countries of the region, the strategic interests of the European Union, and the changing geopolitical environment. It is precisely the interaction between these dimensions that makes the question of the Western Balkans' future European integration relevant not only from the perspective of the countries themselves, but also for the future shape of the European Union and its capacity to act as a geopolitical actor.

Building on the research initiated in 2024, experts from the six Western Balkan countries (WB6) once again provided assessments of political developments in their respective countries, covering the period from September 2025 to September 2026. These analyses offer a complex picture of political processes unfolding across the region, characterised by overlapping, competing, and at times conflicting political dynamics. At the same time, the assessments reveal substantial differences among the Western Balkan states in terms of the pace of European integration and the prospects for further EU enlargement.

The experts' assessments point to considerable divergence in the dynamics of the enlargement process. Despite persistent domestic challenges, Albania and Montenegro have continued to pursue reforms and closer alignment with the European Union. In Serbia, by contrast, the European integration process has clearly lost momentum, with autocratic tendencies growing stronger, and President Aleksandar

Vučić increasingly pursuing a balancing strategy to maintain flexibility in relations with different international partners. In North Macedonia, the accession process remains deeply entangled with questions of national identity and disputes concerning relations with neighbouring states, contributing to the continued lack of significant progress in negotiations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, following a prolonged period of political deadlock, prospects for the implementation of the EU Growth Plan have improved. Meanwhile, in Kosovo, domestic political instability has remained a central feature of the period under review, alongside a more critical approach from the EU towards Pristina.

These divergent trajectories are significant not only for assessing the institutional dimension of the EU enlargement process, but also for demonstrating that "Europe" remains a contested yet highly significant political and symbolic category in the Western Balkans. European integration is not merely a technical process centred on adopting the EU acquis and implementing successive reforms. It is also a profoundly political process through which questions of identity, sovereignty, modernisation, security, and the position of individual states within the broader European political order are articulated and negotiated.

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ALBANIA

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EU integration has been the main guiding framework for Albanian domestic and foreign policy for more than two decades. This process, driven by efforts to comply with EU accession criteria, has been characterised by opportunities, challenges, stagnation, fatigue, and acceleration dynamics shaped by both domestic and external factors. Albania was granted EU candidate status in June 2014. Accession negotiations were formally opened in 2022, though negotiations on the first cluster (Fundamentals) began in October 2024 (Council of the European Union, 2024). The European Commission's 2024 Communication on Enlargement Policy underlined the support for advancing Albania's accession process, including its ambitious objective to close accession negotiations by the end of 2027 (European Commission, 2024). The EU's geopolitical (re)turn towards the region was also reflected in the acceleration of the negotiations process for Albania, with the opening of 4 out of 6 clusters in less than a year and the completion of the opening phase by the end of 2025. Also, the period from September 2025 to August 2026 marked an intensive phase of Albania's accession process, due to the beginning of provisional chapter closures. This substantial acceleration has gained public support and revived expectations for EU membership. However, whether Albania will be able to turn this momentum into an opportunity depends on the willingness and efforts to deliver concrete reform results.

EU-Albania relations (2025-2026)

In the period from September 2025 to August 2026, Albania completed the phase of opening negotiating clusters and chapters. It opened negotiations on Cluster 4 – Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity on 16 September 2025, and Cluster 5 – Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion on 17 November 2025 (Council of European Union, 2025). As such, by the end of November 2025, Albania had opened negotiations on all six negotiating clusters in little more than one year since the opening of the first negotiating cluster, demonstrating a substantial acceleration of the process compared to pre-negotiation phases.

The findings of the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR), which assessed benchmarks for Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, represent a milestone for Albania. The Council of the European Union (2026d) concluded that Albania had fulfilled the interim benchmarks for the Fundamentals cluster. This did not mean that Albania had completed the reforms under the Fundamentals cluster, but that it allowed the process to move towards the stage of setting closing benchmarks for the provisional closure of chapters, subject to continuous monitoring of fulfilment of these benchmarks. The new stage materialised on 14 July 2026, with the provisional closure of negotiations on Chapter 25 – Science and Research, Chapter 26 – Education and Culture, and Chapter 30 – External Relations (Council of the European Union, 2026c). Therefore, by September 2026, Albania opened all 33 negotiating chapters and provisionally closed three. This progress also marks a shift from the political objective of formally opening chapters towards demonstrating effective and sustainable implementation of the reforms.

Albania's Reform Agenda under the Reform and Growth Facility is a key component of the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans until 2027. The aim is to accelerate socio-economic development to prepare Albania for EU membership through financial assistance of 922.1 million EUR, conditional on Albania's progress in reform implementation

(European External Action Service, 2025a). The Growth Plan has been a concrete component of EU–Albania relations during the period from September 2025 to August 2026. The European Commission disbursed 99.3 million EUR in October 2025 due to Albania's fulfilment of 21 out of 41 reform measures (European External Action Service, 2025b). A second release of 49 million EUR in May 2026, bringing the total disbursement to 212.8 million EUR, was based on progress in several reform steps, while others remained subject to further implementation (European External Action Service, 2026). While this approach reveals the opportunities offered by the Growth Plan, it also points out the importance of conditionality in the disbursement of funds.

Overall, during the period from September 2025 to August 2026, EU–Albania relations intensified through several Accession Conferences, the opening of all negotiating clusters and chapters, the release of financial assistance through the Growth Plan, and the start of the provisional closure of negotiating chapters. EU institutions highlight several continuing challenges for Albania, such as the substantial implementation of reforms, progress in the rule of law reforms, parliamentary oversight, anti-corruption mechanisms and measures, political polarisation, limited institutional capacity, limited inclusion of civil society, and media freedom (European Commission, 2025a; European Commission, 2026g). While this period shows a clear intensification of bilateral relations, the focus is shifting from accelerating the process to a more demanding phase centred on producing measurable reform results.

Internal dialogue on the EU

The internal dialogue among public opinion, political parties, and civil society actors plays an important role in reform implementation and domestic transformation. EU membership enjoys wide political and societal support in Albania, as shown by recent surveys. 92% of Albanians

support EU accession according to the results of the Perception Survey published in June 2026 by the European Commission (2026e). Even though EU integration has never been a divisive issue among major domestic political actors in Albania, the reporting period has been marked by intensified public discourse on the pace of progress, reform credibility, political will and capacities to deliver reform, and political ownership of the process. The Albanian parliamentary elections of 11 May 2025 shaped the context for political developments during September 2025. The Socialist Party won the 2025 parliamentary elections and secured a parliamentary majority sufficient to form a government without coalition partners, and the Democratic Party maintained its position as the largest opposition party, followed by other smaller political parties (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025). The EU integration process remained a shared strategic issue, even though different political parties offered varied interpretations of progress and failures, and political polarisation occasionally became an obstacle to consensus on reforms.

During the 11 May 2025 elections, EU membership was a central electoral promise of the Socialist Party, which started the new mandate in September 2025 with the acceleration of the accession process as its core political objective. During the period from September 2025 to August 2026, the Albanian government underlined the opening of all clusters and chapters, the fulfilment of interim benchmarks for Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, and the provisional closure of the first three chapters as proof of concrete reform implementation results. In addition, the current government has set two key strategic objectives, such as concluding negotiations by 2027 and obtaining EU membership by 2030. As such, the achievements of the last year have been framed by the government not only as an achievement of national objectives but also as evidence of its capacity to deliver measurable reforms and strengthen international credibility.

Despite the government's tendency to take ownership of the process, EU accession is a strategic objective for the Democratic Party and other opposition parties. However, opposition parties have been questioning the quality and credibility of reform implementation, presenting concerns about corruption, state capture, the functioning of democratic institutions, political pressure, and the concentration of political power. The government and opposition forces are not primarily involved in a pro-/anti-EU debate but rather in disagreements on tangible progress in the implementation of reform. There have also been concerns in the domestic discourse about whether geopolitical considerations can undermine the objective evaluation of reform results.

Media and civil society have important leverage in shaping the national discourse on EU accession. Political polarisation is also reflected in the media, particularly in how media outlets frame developments, progress, and challenges related to the EU accession process. Media freedom remains a consistent critical issue in Albania, with consequences extending to democratic accountability, public participation, and the framing of national discourse (European Commission, 2025a). While civil society actors are among the main stakeholders in this process, they remain relatively less visible in the national debate. They are expected to be included more in the current phases of negotiations and chapter closure, due to the need for greater monitoring of reforms. The EU has continued to support and fund civil society initiatives and capacity-building activities in Albania. However, the accession process has remained framed mainly in political rather than national terms. A more inclusive internal dialogue requires greater transparency, accountability, and consultation with civil society to foster a healthier and more sustainable process.

The Flamingo Revolution started on 31 May 2026 following a clash between protesters and security guards at Zverneci beach in the Vjosa-Narta protected area, and marked an important development as a public reaction

to current dynamics in the country (Reuters, 2026). It is a public protest movement that initially started over the clash between environmental protection and development projects, but extended to broader anti-government, anti-establishment, and anti-corruption demands (Kucharski, 2026; Reuters, 2026). This movement opened more space for public, civil society, and media involvement in shaping public discourse and demanding governmental accountability. Although this movement broadened the internal dialogue and raised hopes of greater accountability, by the end of August 2026, it had not yet resulted in clearly identifiable policy or institutional outputs.

Hence, the internal dialogue on the EU during the period from September 2025 to August 2026 has been dominated by the pro-EU narrative, with divisions among stakeholders regarding transparency, credibility, ownership, and inclusive and tangible reform outputs. While the government has assumed political ownership and highlights progress and achievements during this period, other stakeholders remain sceptical of reform-based domestic transformation. Therefore, the main challenge has been to maintain EU accession as a common national objective without instrumentalising it for political purposes in a highly polarised domestic political environment.

Expert voice

The period from September 2025 to August 2026 demonstrates a clear intensification of Albania's EU accession process. The opening of the last two negotiating clusters, the fulfilment of interim benchmarks for the Fundamentals cluster, and the provisional closure of the first three chapters revived the hopes and expectations for EU membership and eased enlargement fatigue dynamics. The trajectory of the process over the last year shows that the political momentum associated with geopolitical imperatives has contributed to its acceleration as the country moves through various

EU accession stages. However, the country's progress should not be linked only to the geopolitical context. Albania's credibility has been supported by its alignment with the EU's foreign and security policy and its role as a strategic partner in the region, as well as efforts put forward during the negotiating process to meet conditionality. As such, the acceleration of the process should not be perceived as a replacement of conditionality but as its interaction with the geopolitical context.

The main issue of concern is whether this momentum can be sustained while the country is moving towards closing chapters, which requires a more qualitative approach focused on substantial implementation, credible evidence, and enhanced capacities to maintain reforms. Considering that the Fundamentals cluster remains open throughout the entire negotiations process, this highlights the importance of continuous progress in areas of the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the functioning of democratic institutions (European Commission, 2025a; European Commission, 2026g). Furthermore, the financial support offered through the Growth Plan is another demonstration of the connection between reform progress and financial incentives. The geopolitical (re)turn has provided another valuable checkpoint for Albania and the EU, testing whether an accelerated accession process can coexist with conditionality. Albania needs to make use of this momentum to enhance its institutional capacities and produce tangible reform results. On the other hand, the EU needs to sustain its financial and political support for the accelerated process without compromising standards and sending contradictory signals.

The evidence from the intensification of relations between the EU and Albania during the period from September 2025 to August 2026 suggests that the EU's geopolitical (re) turn towards the Western Balkans is more than rhetorical. However, the sustainability of this pace of relations depends on avoiding the treatment of speed of the process as the

main indicator of success. Albania constitutes a valuable case for understanding the extent to which credible conditionality and geopolitical considerations can operate in parallel. The country should focus on enhancing implementation capacity, parliamentary oversight, depoliticising the EU accession process, ensuring institutional independence, and creating a more inclusive process. The EU should focus on rewarding measurable reform results in combination with financial and technical support. In the current context, substantial reform implementation is essential to consolidate the momentum and ensure that the acceleration is not temporary, thereby preventing a return to a prolonged negotiations path.

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Prologue

2026 exposed the consequences of delayed reforms more clearly than before. Two years after the European Council decided to open accession negotiations, BiH still had not completed the limited number of steps needed to make that decision operational. Yet, delays increasingly carried direct financial and economic costs. Growth Plan funding remained inaccessible and partly at risk, while the definitive application of the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) increased pressure on several important export sectors. Problems affecting professional drivers under Schengen rules escalated, while the full implementation of the Entry/Exit System (EES) made the impact of EU mobility and migration rules more visible to BiH citizens.

The year also brought controversies that revealed changes in the international environment surrounding BiH. This raises a broader question about the EU's influence. The Union remains BiH's largest trading partner, largest provider of financial assistance, and most important regulatory reference point. Still, its ability to translate this structural position into domestic political reform appears increasingly limited. By contrast, the United States, despite having fewer political and economic instruments, has repeatedly demonstrated a greater capacity to affect the immediate calculations of domestic political actors. In this sense, if 2025 was the year of great escalations, 2026 increasingly appears to be the year of consequences.

Stalled accession process

The European Council's March 2024 decision to open accession negotiations with BiH was presented as a historic breakthrough. The Commission had recommended the move despite limited reforms, overstating progress on several technical issues as evidence of sufficient political momentum (Džananović, 2024). By late 2024 and throughout 2025, reform momentum had disappeared, largely due to the confrontation between the Republika Srpska (RS) and state institutions (Džananović, 2025).

The European Commission's 2025 Report confirmed that the crisis had seriously damaged BiH's EU accession path (European Commission, 2025b). The state-level coalition effectively collapsed, legislative activity declined, and progress in fundamental areas remained very limited. The easing of the RS crisis at the end of the year created another opportunity, but the requirements for moving forward remained essentially unchanged: adoption of the Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council (HJPC/VSTV), changes concerning the Court of BiH, and the appointment of a Chief Negotiator.

High-level EU engagement continued. EU Operation Commander Lieutenant General Ludovic Pinon de Quincy visited in November and returned in March 2026 (Chirca, 2025; EUFOR Public Affairs Office, 2026). In April, EU Military Committee Chair General Seán Clancy and NATO Military Committee Chair Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone made a joint visit, underlining the growing link between BiH's EU path and wider European security concerns (Strategic Communications EEAS, 2026).

During European Council President António Costa's visit on June 1, he reminded BiH that it was only a few steps from the next phase, but that those steps remained unchanged: judicial legislation, appointment of the Chief Negotiator, and implementation of the Reform Agenda. He also directly linked continued failures to financial losses under the Growth Plan (European Western Balkans, 2026a).

A month later, the EU's High Representative Kaja Kallas made her third visit in sixteen months as, by then, the gap between diplomatic engagement and reform output was too difficult to ignore (Reuters, 2026).

Implementing peace and stability

In BiH, the credibility of the EU depends on much more than its enlargement policy, as the Union remains an important security actor through EUFOR Althea.

The repeated visits of the EU Operation Commander, the joint visit by EU and NATO military leadership in April, and additional European Peace Facility assistance for the Armed Forces of BiH[1] all demonstrated that Brussels views BiH through both enlargement and security lenses. Kallas made this connection particularly explicit during her July visit. She described BiH's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and stability as strategically important for the EU (European Western Balkans, 2026b). Speaking to EUFOR troops, she stated that peace had endured for thirty-one years because it remained *"enforceable"*. The statement points to an unresolved contradiction in the EU's approach to BiH that became particularly visible in recent years. The accession process is based on the expectation that European norms, institutions, and rule-of-law standards will eventually become domestically owned and implemented. Still, the existing political order relies on an international military presence and the extraordinary powers of the Office of the High Representative (OHR).

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[1] In May, the Council approved an additional 15 million EUR European Peace Facility assistance measure for the Armed Forces of BiH, intended to strengthen operational capacity and interoperability.

The High Representative controversy: A public defeat for European influence

The sudden resignation of the High Representative Christian Schmidt in May, amid reported US pressure[2], caught European actors largely unprepared, turning what had traditionally been an assumed European prerogative into a public demonstration of EU disunity and declining control over the political process. While the formal objective of the international community has long been to close the OHR once the conditions contained in the so-called *5+2 Agenda*[3] are fulfilled, political developments in previous years had repeatedly demonstrated the continuing fragility of state institutions and thus the need for the OHR in its full mandate.

The succession process revealed open disagreement between the United States and European governments. The US supported Italian diplomat Antonio Zanardi Landi and appeared to favour a more limited international role in the future. Most European governments supported French diplomat René Troccaz[4]. When the Peace Implementation Council[5] failed to reach consensus, Washington publicly criticised

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2 Schmidt himself subsequently stated that his departure had occurred under US pressure (Sito-Sucic, 2026).

3 The "5+2 Agenda" conditions closure of the OHR upon the completion of five objectives – covering state and defense property, Brčko, fiscal sustainability and the rule of law – as well as an additional two conditions: signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement and a positive assessment by the Peace Implementation Council of full compliance with the Dayton Peace Agreement.

4 René Troccaz had served since 2023 as France's Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, coordinating French policy towards the region and engaging directly with BiH authorities, including through the Peace Implementation Council.

5 The Peace Implementation Council (PIC) is the international body comprising 55 countries and international organisations established in 1995 to oversee the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement. Its executive arm, the Steering Board, provides political guidance to the OHR and includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, the EU, the European Commission, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation represented by Turkey; Russia formally remains a member but has not participated in Steering Board meetings since 2021.

European indecision and threatened its withdrawal from the international presence in BiH (Borger, 2026). In the absence of agreement, American diplomat Louis Crishock, previously Schmidt's Principal Deputy, assumed the role of Acting High Representative on July 1. An initial deadline for reaching agreement on a permanent successor passed without result.

The controversy exposed unusually public transatlantic divisions over BiH and highlighted a deeper contradiction on the EU accession path: despite years of European integration, the process has still not left the country sufficiently safe and stable to operate confidently without the OHR. The unresolved question is not simply who succeeds Schmidt, but how BiH can move from the Dayton system of supervision to the Brussels model of domestic responsibility and integration, and whether the EU can bear the weight of that process on its own.

Declining normative power

The OHR dispute also provides a useful perspective on the changing nature of EU influence in BiH. The Union remains structurally dominant. It is BiH's largest market and donor and its main source of regulatory standards. Nevertheless, Brussels' ability to translate this position into immediate political compliance is much weaker than might be expected.

EU sanctions policy illustrates the problem. In March 2026, the Council again extended the legal framework allowing restrictive measures against individuals or entities threatening BiH's sovereignty, territorial integrity, constitutional order, or the Dayton framework. Yet no individuals or entities were listed (Council of the European Union, 2026a). This contrasts sharply with the United States, which in previous years imposed extensive sanctions on Dodik, members of his family, political allies, and associated business networks. More importantly, in October 2025, Washington also demonstrated that these measures could be

removed following political changes and de-escalation. The EU's foreign-policy instruments are constrained by the need to maintain agreement among Member States. Any individual EU government could weaken the credibility of a common European position. Domestic political actors are well adapted to this reality. Instead of regarding the EU as a single source of conditionality, they can cultivate relationships with individual Member States that can moderate or block pressure from Brussels. For years, Hungary under Viktor Orbán was the clearest example of how a Member State could weaken a common EU position on BiH. Croatia may now pose a different but somewhat related challenge, as its 2026 parliamentary resolution on electoral and constitutional reform in BiH showed how national and ethno-political preferences can shape Member State and thus EU positions towards BiH[6].

Integration works best when EU rules are seen as legitimate and unavoidable – not negotiable through political protection from individual member states.

EU financial assistance and trade

The EU remains BiH's most important economic partner by a very large margin. This position has been one of the strongest arguments for European influence in the country. In 2026, the nature of that economic relationship continued to change. European rules increasingly produced direct effects on BiH regardless of whether the accession process itself moved forward.

Well-established financial assistance continued through IPA III and other instruments. BiH completed procedures connected with 140.5 million EUR in IPA III grant assistance

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[6] In July 2026, the Croatian Parliament adopted a resolution on strengthening the political position of Croats in BiH that explicitly addressed electoral and constitutional reform, prompting accusations in BiH of interference in the country's internal affairs (Hrvatski sabor, 2026).

for the 2025–2027 period, supporting governance, rule of law, environmental measures, and other reforms (Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2026). The much more politically important issue, however, remained the Growth Plan.

Growth Plan stalemate: the price of delay

The Commission finally approved BiH's Reform Agenda in December 2025, allowing the country to theoretically access up to 976.6 million EUR through the Reform and Growth Facility[7]. Approval of the document nevertheless failed to produce immediate financial benefits. In April, the EU's Head of Delegation and Special Representative in BiH Luigi Soreca stressed that "there is a cost to inaction", clarifying that "without reforms, 373 million euros is now at risk, on top of 108 million euros already lost" (European Western Balkans, 2026f). The Reform Agenda included more than one hundred individual reform steps, but implementation had barely begun.

As the Growth Plan marks a shift towards more transactional EU conditionality, missed reforms now carry direct financial costs. This may strengthen EU leverage, but it also shows that Brussels increasingly relies on financial penalties where the political promise of membership alone no longer suffices.

CBAM: the EU reaches BiH before membership

The full implementation of the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) from January 2026 made the costs of non-accession more tangible. Covering sectors such as electricity, aluminium, cement, iron, and steel, it affects activities accounting for around 11% of BiH exports and 3.2% of GDP (Shah et al., 2026). The impact is particularly

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[7] The amount had already been reduced because BiH failed to submit the agenda within the original timeframe (European Commission, 2025b).

serious given BiH's dependence on coal and slow progress on energy and carbon-pricing reforms. CBAM is both an economic and political issue. BiH can delay accession reforms but not changes in the EU market. Integration thus becomes a moving target: the country remains outside EU decision-making while adapting to evolving rules to preserve access to its main market.

The Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) was one of the few areas of tangible progress in 2026. After adopting key payment legislation and launching a domestic instant-payment system, the Central Bank applied for accession on 6 August, potentially reducing the cost and time of cross-border payments with the EU.

Southern interconnection: EU and US approaches diverge

The Southern Gas Interconnection became another major EU-related issue in 2026[8]. US involvement intensified in late 2025 and early 2026, after years during which the EU had supported diversification in principle but failed to generate enough political momentum to move the project forward. Washington then pushed urgent legislative changes and a central role for US-based AAFS Infrastructure and Energy. It framed the Southern Interconnection primarily as a geopolitical project to reduce Russian influence and accelerate diversification, while the EU supported the objective but stressed compliance with the SAA, competition rules, transparency, ownership standards, and the energy *acquis* (Zvijerac & Tuhina, 2026).

The dispute highlighted a broader difference in approach: after years of EU caution and no progress, Washington's emphasis on speed and strategic delivery appeared

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[8] The project is designed to connect BiH with the Croatian gas system and potentially the LNG terminal at Krk, thereby reducing the country's dependence on Russian gas entering through a single supply route. The strategic rationale enjoys broad Western support. The controversy concerned how the project should be implemented.

more convincing. Brussels' concerns over regulatory compatibility were legitimate, but increasingly difficult to defend when procedural consistency had produced so little movement. In this case, the US approach was more effective because it treated energy diversification as an urgent geopolitical priority rather than another indefinitely negotiable reform file.

Public support for EU membership

Citizens still appear more committed to the European destination than confident that the political system can deliver it. Despite political stagnation, public support for EU membership rose in 2026. A Directorate for European Integration survey found that 74.4% would vote for accession, up from 69.9% in 2025 (Direkcija za evropska integracije BiH, 2026). Support remained much higher in the Federation (86.1%) than in the RS (54.1%), although the figure for the RS also increased (Direkcija za evropska integracije BiH, 2026).

Peace and political stability (38.4%) and freedom of movement (34.5%) remain the main perceived benefits, making the truck-driver and EES controversies particularly relevant. Opposition is driven mainly by socio-economic concerns, while corruption is seen as the most important reform priority within the accession process.

The main paradox is that support for membership remains strong, but confidence in the process is weak: only 33.9% expect BiH to join within ten years, while 30.9% believe it will never join.

As the 2026 general elections approach, the stalled EU process has become an easy target for the opposition, while the governing coalition remains divided over who is responsible – or shows little urgency at all. Rather than being treated as an overarching strategic objective, EU integration has increasingly been reduced to just another policy issue, absorbed into routine partisan bargaining.

Free movement deferred: The mobility costs of non-membership

The "truck drivers' crisis" intensified in 2026[9]. In January, drivers from BiH, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia blocked freight terminals, while more than one hundred had reportedly already faced deportation or expulsion (Bytyci, 2026). The issue exposes a broader contradiction in EU integration: goods move through increasingly integrated supply chains, while the people transporting them remain treated as short-term third-country visitors. The European Commission acknowledged the problem in its 2026 Visa Strategy, identifying truck drivers as a category that may require longer stays. If unresolved, the rule could push companies, vehicles, and workers to relocate to EU Member States, turning the crisis into a visible example of the gap between the EU's promise of mobility and the practical limits of non-membership.

The EES, fully operational from 10 April 2026, introduced systematic biometric registration, automated monitoring of stays, and stricter enforcement of the 90/180-day rule for BiH citizens travelling to the EU. More than simply a border-efficiency measure, EES makes the inequality of non-membership highly visible: while EU citizens move freely within the Union, BiH citizens – despite visa-free travel and deep economic and social ties – are fingerprinted, digitally tracked, and treated as third-country visitors. The disparity is even more striking within BiH itself, where around 800,000 BiH nationals have also acquired Croatian citizenship and therefore enjoy EU free-movement rights unavailable to many of their fellow citizens. This effectively creates two mobility regimes within the same country and reinforces perceptions of institutionalised discrimination between those inside and outside the Union. As in

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[9] The Schengen 90/180-day rule is incompatible with the needs of professional drivers who repeatedly enter the EU for work. EES has made enforcement stricter and more systematic.

other countries, the implementation also brought hours-long queues, missed flights and connections, additional travel costs, and particular hardship for elderly travellers, families with children, and persons with reduced mobility.

The fracturing of the Western consensus

The developments of late 2025 and 2026 reveal a more fragmented Western presence in BiH and the EU's growing difficulty in converting structural dominance into political authority. The Union still possesses instruments Washington cannot match – membership, the Single Market, pre-accession funding, and the acquis – yet its political leverage increasingly falls short of these assets.

The problem is not a lack of EU power, but its weak and inconsistent use, which makes the decline of EU normative power especially striking. Regulatory influence is expanding through CBAM, EES, the Growth Plan, energy rules and trade dependence, yet political compliance has not followed. BiH citizens and companies increasingly adapt to EU rules, while political elites continue to resist EU demands. The EU is thus becoming more effective at regulating BiH than at transforming it.

The US can often alter political calculations quickly, while the EU claims the more ambitious goal of changing institutions. Yet slow decision-making, internal disunity and weak enforcement have eroded Brussels' credibility. The Western approach is therefore not only less unified – the EU increasingly appears to be the weaker political actor within it.

The EU's reaction to the funeral in Belgrade of the notorious war criminal Ratko Mladić, who was serving a life sentence for the Srebrenica genocide and other war crimes and crimes against humanity, exposed a deeper problem. EU leaders initially remained silent, while a Commission spokesperson downplayed the event as not being a state-honours funeral (FENA Agency, 2026), despite the visible presence

of officials and the military. Only after strong criticism, particularly from Croatia (HINA, 2026), did the presidents of the Commission and European Council describe the images as "shocking" (RFI, 2026). The episode was more than a PR failure: shocking, certainly, but hardly surprising. It exposed a persistent strategic blind spot towards Serbia and a failure to grasp how revisionism there directly affects BiH and regional stability. Treating this mainly as a problem for Serbia's accession prospects misses the point: the EU's reading of Serbia is inseparable from the credibility of its policy towards BiH and the Western Balkans.

Conclusion

The significance of 2026 lies less in what happened than in what it revealed. BiH can remain formally committed to EU membership while the accession process gradually loses its capacity to transform domestic politics. European integration still enjoys public legitimacy and remains economically unavoidable, but it no longer functions as the dominant political incentive it was expected to become.

This creates an increasingly uncomfortable asymmetry. The EU is gaining influence over how BiH trades, travels, produces energy, and accesses finance, while losing influence over the political choices that determine whether the country can become a member. This may produce regulatory adaptation without the institutional and political transformation that enlargement was designed to achieve.

The weakening of the previously unified Western approach makes this more serious. Transatlantic divergence gives domestic actors more room to manoeuvre between external partners rather than respond to a coherent Western framework. With elections approaching, the stalled EU process has also been absorbed into routine partisan politics: the opposition mocks the failed promises and the lack of progress, while the governing coalition remains divided over responsibility or is largely indifferent.

The real challenge is therefore no longer simply how to accelerate accession, but whether the process can recover enough political credibility to shape choices inside the country before integration proceeds around it. This is particularly troubling because BiH is not a distant neighbour, but a candidate country bordering the Union, economically dependent on its market and supported by a population that still largely favours membership. If enlargement cannot generate transformation under such favourable conditions, the problem may no longer lie only with the candidate country, but with the enlargement approach itself. The reaction to Mladić's funeral added another warning: the EU's problem is not only inadequate leverage, but at times an insufficient understanding of the political forces it seeks to influence – particularly in Serbia, where strategic misreading has direct consequences for BiH and the wider region. These questions left by 2026 are therefore more fundamental than whether BiH will meet the next deadline.

KOSOVO

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Relations with the EU: Status, timeline and Growth Plan

Kosovo–EU relations between September 2025 and August 2026 moved from conditional re-engagement to renewed institutional volatility, with EU financial instruments advancing faster than political trust. The period opened with a stalled EU-facilitated dialogue round: on 11 September 2025, chief negotiators Besnik Bislimi and Petar Petkovic met in Brussels under EUSR Peter Sorensen, but reached no agreement on implementing the 2023 Ohrid Annex, particularly the Missing Persons Commission (KOHA.net, 2025a). Local elections on 12 October 2025 saw Srpska Lista return to nine of the ten Serb-majority municipalities in the north, ending the 2023 boycott (Balkan Insight, 2025; European Western Balkans, 2025b). On 4 November, the European Commission adopted its 2025 Kosovo Report, confirming Kosovo's European path while flagging limited institutional functionality (European Commission, 2025d). Kosovo remains only a potential candidate with no negotiating framework – unlike Serbia (22 chapters open), Montenegro (33), and Albania (33). EU financial assistance keeps growing regardless – Council President António Costa noted in June 2026 that the EU had invested 3.7 billion EUR in Kosovo since 1999. The EU remains Kosovo's largest external partner. Potwierdzić zamiar autorki.(European Council, 2026b).

The clearest shift came on 17 December 2025, when the EU-Western Balkans Summit produced a pledge from Commission President von der Leyen to move forward on

lifting the 2023 punitive measures, "programming EUR 216 million" and intending to "release EUR 205 million early next year" (European Commission, 2025h). Domestic instability nonetheless deepened: a second snap parliamentary election on 28 December 2025 gave Vetevendosje more than 50% of the vote, and a government under Albin Kurti was confirmed on 11 February 2026, with Albulena Haxhiu elected as Speaker (European Western Balkans, 2026d). Two days later, on 13 February, the Assembly of Kosovo ratified the Facility and Loan Agreements with the European Union, marking a milestone for the country's participation in the EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (Reform Monitor, 2026a). On 16 April, the Commission began transferring 61.8 million EUR in pre-financing – 28.74 million EUR in loans to the budget and 33.04 million EUR via WBIF (17.73 million EUR grants, 15.31 million EUR loans) – while flagging a 30 June deadline for 13 reform steps worth 90.8 million EUR (EEAS, 2026a).

Institutional stability again collapsed: after the Assembly failed to elect a president on 5 March 2026, President Osmani's dissolution decree was contested, suspended by the Constitutional Court on 9 March, and reinstated on 25 March with a 34-day extension; when the Assembly again failed by 28 April, acting President Haxhiu called elections for 7 June 2026 (European Western Balkans, 2026e). On 14 March, EUSR Sorensen secured Kosovo's agreement to grant 12-month residence permits to Serb health and education workers and students under the Law on Foreigners (EEAS, 2026c). Because the June election left Kosovo without a functioning Assembly at the 30 June deadline, six of the 13 reform steps were not completed on time, representing an estimated 40-60 million EUR exposure, according to Kosovo's chief EU negotiator Jeton Zulfaj (KOHA.net, 2026b; Albeu.com, 2026). The 7 June election, held amid a record-low turnout of 37 percent, again returned Vetevendosje as the largest party, with 53 seats, followed by PDK (22), LDK (18) and AAK (7) (Reporteri.net, 2026). On

17 June, the European Parliament adopted its resolution on the 2025 Commission Report by 412 votes to 174 with 58 abstentions, calling 2025 a "lost year" and backing Kosovo's candidate-status request (Euronews Albania, 2026a).

The period closed with renewed rule-of-law tension. Following the 15 July withdrawal of 2022 resignations by Kosovo Serb judicial staff, the Prosecutorial Council's acceptance of the original resignations drew EU criticism as "incompatible with the law" (EEAS, 2026b); on 27 August, the Judicial Council likewise denied the requests of several Serb judges and court administrative staff to return to their posts, nearly four years after Kosovo Serbs staged a mass resignation from Kosovo institutions in 2022 (Balkan Insight, 2026). Overall, EU–Kosovo relations combined an unprecedented financial opening with a governance record too unstable to fully absorb it.

Internal dialogue on the EU

Kosovo's domestic EU discourse in 2025–2026 stayed overwhelmingly pro-European, but split over how conditionality should be managed, not over the destination itself. Vetevendosje combined sovereignty-first rhetoric with explicit European ambition: after meeting Commissioner Kos on 15 May 2026, acting PM Kurti sought candidate status, stating Kosovo wanted "not shortcuts or a back door, only a merit-based process", and citing over 80 percent public support for membership (KosovaPress, 2026; Kosovo Online, 2026a). The government repeatedly attributed Growth Plan delays to parliamentary obstruction rather than its own choices – a framing that opposition parties rejected.

The clearest party-level divergence concerned the Belgrade dialogue. Ahead of the December 2025 election, PDK, LDK and AAK all included the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue in their governing programmes, while Vetevendosje's did not. PDK pledged coordination "with the US and the EU" while protecting "the sovereignty and constitutional order of Kosovo".

AAK committed to implementing all dialogue agreements towards "mutual recognition" (KOHA.net, 2025b). This was not a pro- versus anti-EU split but a disagreement over sequencing and trust in EU-mediated engagement with Belgrade, sharpened by the fact that Vetevendosje held no high-level dialogue meetings throughout its term.

Institutional actors reinforced this framing from outside party politics. The European Parliament's June 2026 resolution, while critical of "complete political paralysis", explicitly reaffirmed Kosovo's European path and supported its 2022 membership application, describing continued reform and dialogue progress as "key" to that path (Euronews Albania, 2026a). The Group for Legal and Political Studies (GLPS), monitoring Growth Plan implementation, warned in real time that delayed legislation – not EU reluctance – was converting reform slippage into "irreversible financial losses", naming specific blocked laws (energy, state aid, justice-sector reform) rather than treating the loss as abstract (GLPS, 2026a). This technocratic voice added a layer to the debate largely absent from party rhetoric: EU conditionality was reframed less as an external imposition and more as a test of Kosovo's own legislative capacity.

The rule-of-law dimension of the debate hardened towards the end of the period. When the Kosovo Prosecutorial Council and then the Judicial Council refused to reinstate Serb judicial staff who had withdrawn their 2022 resignations, the EEAS twice stated the decisions appeared "incompatible with the law, with due process and overall rule of law requirements" (EEAS, 2026c), while domestic legal commentators assessed that the return of judges and prosecutors who have resigned should only be done through a new competition and in relation to the law, and that reinstatement cannot be done through political decisions or apologies, as judges must be independent and respect the law (Bota Sot, 2026). This illustrates the underlying pattern of the year: Kosovo's institutions increasingly treat multi-ethnic integration and EU-facing reform as competing

rather than complementary obligations, even as rhetoric affirms the European destination in near-unanimous terms. The unresolved question is not whether Kosovo wants EU membership – polling and cross-party consensus both confirm that it does – but whether repeated crises keep converting a shared strategic goal into missed deadlines.

Genuine anti-EU sentiment remains marginal in parliamentary politics: no Assembly party campaigns against the European path, and the European Parliament itself has noted a broad political consensus on integration. Where scepticism exist, it targets specific EU choices, chiefly the non-recognition of Kosovo's statehood by five member states, often cited domestically as a double standard (NewUnionPost, 2025c).

Civil society and business voices added further, less partisan registers to the debate. The Kosovo Chamber of Commerce's Lulzim Rafuna warned in May 2026 that the lack of functioning institutions was jeopardising the country's ability to draw down Growth Plan funds – a direct economic cost of the stalemate, quite separate from party rhetoric (Kosovo Online, 2026b). Commentators writing ahead of the November 2025 enlargement package similarly argued that Kurti's praise of the Commission's progress assessment "borders on self-congratulation", given the government's own role in blocking Growth Plan ratification (European Western Balkans, 2025a).

Expert voice from the region

From a regional perspective, 2025–2026 marked a shift in Kosovo–EU relations towards a model that was simultaneously more transactional and more fragile. Compared with the more punitive framework that characterised 2023–2024, the relationship increasingly moved towards performance-based engagement, whereby concrete institutional and reform-related steps were more directly linked to financial and political incentives. The December 2025

decision to programme 216 million EUR in EU support, followed by 61.8 million EUR in Growth Plan-related pre-financing in April 2026 and the accommodation introduced under the Law on Foreigners concerning 12-month residence permits in March 2026, illustrate the EU's willingness to respond relatively quickly to measurable progress. At the same time, the period was marked by considerable domestic political instability. Kosovo experienced three parliamentary elections within eighteen months, while the Assembly was dissolved on two occasions, and part of the initial Growth Plan reform deadline was missed. These developments suggest that the principal challenge was not the absence of EU support, but the limited capacity of domestic institutions to maintain the political and administrative continuity required by a performance-based integration framework.

This period can therefore be characterised as one of "intensified EU instruments without a corresponding intensification of mutual trust". The European Parliament's description of 2025 as a "lost year", alongside its continued support for Kosovo's aspiration to obtain candidate status, illustrates this duality. EU institutions have not abandoned Kosovo's European perspective; rather, their approach increasingly places emphasis on the extent to which Kosovo's domestic institutions are capable of translating political commitments into sustained implementation. This represents an important departure from earlier periods, when EU restrictive measures could more readily be presented in Pristina as primarily the result of external pressure. By contrast, the missed Growth Plan deadline and the unresolved reintegration of Kosovo Serb judicial staff during 2025–2026 indicate that several of the obstacles to further progress cannot be explained solely through EU conditionality.

The evidence from this period also demonstrates the continuing gap between the EU's broader geopolitical commitment to Kosovo and the pace of substantive

enlargement-related progress. The EU's renewed strategic engagement appears to have contributed to process-based milestones, including the removal of restrictive measures in December 2025 and the subsequent unlocking of Growth Plan financing following Kosovo's fulfilment of relevant procedural commitments. However, these developments have not yet translated into a structural breakthrough in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue. Engagement remained largely constrained to the level of chief negotiators, while broader challenges concerning governance, the rule of law, and institutional integration persisted.

For Kosovo, the developments of 2025–2026 therefore demonstrate that closer strategic alignment with the EU can accelerate specific integration mechanisms and create tangible political and financial opportunities. Nevertheless, sustained progress towards European integration remains dependent on domestic institutional capacity, political continuity, and the consistent implementation of reforms. For the EU, the period highlights a parallel challenge: maintaining the credibility of a merit-based enlargement process requires political and financial conditionality to be applied consistently, transparently, and predictably across successive political cycles.

Two structural risks are particularly significant for the period ahead. First, the Growth Plan's remaining and substantially larger reform commitment, which includes 27 additional reform steps associated with 165.9 million EUR and is due by the end of 2026, falls within the mandate of the government formed following the 7 June election. Consequently, renewed institutional instability would carry a potentially greater financial and political cost than the shortfall associated with the earlier deadline. Second, the reintegration of Kosovo Serb judicial staff has emerged as a recurring point of tension because it lies at the intersection of two central EU priorities: the rule of law and multi-ethnic institutional inclusion. Treating these dimensions as separate policy questions risks undermining the coherence of

Kosovo's broader integration agenda. The extent to which Kosovo's institutions can address this intersection through sustainable institutional arrangements is therefore likely to be an important indicator of EU confidence in the subsequent phase of the accession process.

MONTENEGRO

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Introduction

Between September 2025 and August 2026, Montenegro achieved its strongest formal progress in EU accession negotiations since the process began. Yet the period should not be read as a linear success story. It exposed a central contradiction: the state became increasingly effective at producing the legal and administrative outputs required by Brussels, while the durability of domestic reforms, political consensus, and regional stability remained uncertain.

Relations with the EU

Over a twelve-month period, Montenegro provisionally closed 11 additional negotiating chapters. This rapid sequence of closures brought the nation's total tally of closed chapters to 18 out of 33, leaving 15 chapters open as the negotiation process approached its final structural phase. This quantitative progress reflected alignment across internal market rules, structural sectoral policies, and financial control mechanisms[1].

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[1] The chronological sequence of these provisional chapter closures demonstrates broad technical coverage across diverse acquis domains. In December 2025, Montenegro closed five chapters in a single block: Chapter 3 (Right of Establishment and Freedom to Provide Services), Chapter 4 (Free Movement of Capital), Chapter 6 (Company Law), Chapter 11 (Agriculture and Rural Development), and Chapter 13 (Fisheries). This was followed in January 2026 by the closure of

This technical acceleration was paralleled by a decisive institutional step within the Council of the European Union, moving Montenegro's accession process into the legal and technical preparation phase. On 22 April 2026, COREPER established the Ad hoc Working Party on Drafting the Accession Treaty with Montenegro (Council of the European Union, 2026g). The working party's mandate is to prepare Montenegro's EU Accession Treaty and related acts. This encompasses the legal and technical preparation of the treaty, including the definition of transitional periods and safeguard mechanisms, while ensuring that the final treaty reflects the agreements formally reached in the accession negotiations and is aligned with the EU's primary law.

This legal preparation was reinforced by concrete fiscal planning. On 30 June 2026, the European Commission adopted a financial package of approximately 3.2 billion EUR for Montenegro's possible accession under the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (European Commission, 2026c). Based on the technical working assumption that Montenegro could accede on 1 January 2028, the package sets out the budgetary arrangements required for a transition from pre-accession assistance to participation in EU internal funding mechanisms. It also constitutes the basis for the Commission's future draft common position on Chapter 33 (Financial and budgetary provisions).

Chapter 32 (Financial Control), which institutionalised public internal financial control and external auditing standards. In March 2026, Chapter 21 (Trans-European Networks) was provisionally closed, aligning national energy, transport, and telecommunications infrastructure with pan-European corridors. The technical momentum continued into the summer of 2026. In June 2026, Podgorica closed Chapter 2 (Freedom of Movement for Workers) and Chapter 28 (Consumer and Health Protection). Finally, in July 2026, two key internal market chapters were closed: Chapter 8 (Competition Policy), which modernised state aid controls and antitrust enforcement, and Chapter 29 (Customs Union), which secured full operational customs interoperability and alignment with common commercial policies.

Practical preparations for full integration extended to linguistic and institutional matters. In July 2026, the Council of the European Union published recruitment calls for lawyer-linguists and assistants in a newly established Montenegrin language team (Council of the European Union, 2026a). The team was tasked with supporting the preparation of Montenegro's Accession Treaty and revising EU primary and secondary legislation in Montenegrin for drafting quality and legal-linguistic consistency.

Montenegro's diplomatic profile was further raised when it hosted the EU–Western Balkans Summit in Tivat on 5 June 2026. The summit was hosted by President Jakov Milatović and chaired by European Council President António Costa, with the participation of EU and Western Balkan leaders. Discussions focused on enlargement, gradual integration, the Growth Plan, regional cooperation, security, and stability. Hosting the summit reinforced Montenegro's position as the region's most advanced EU accession candidate, without prejudging the outcome or timetable of accession.

In July 2026, the Government of Montenegro adopted its Fourth Semi-Annual Report within the EU Reform Agenda under the Growth Plan, reporting that 34 of 41 reform steps had been completed and linking those reported results to potential EU support of 97.3 million EUR (Government of Montenegro, 2026). This was a government self-assessment; at the time of writing, the European Commission had not yet published its validation or disbursement decision. The third reporting cycle illustrates why this distinction matters. In January 2026, the government reported that 24 of 45 reform steps had been fully completed and anticipated potential support of up to approximately 59 million EUR (Ministry of European Affairs, 2026). In May 2026, following its assessment of the third payment request, the Commission released 44.2 million EUR for reforms in research and innovation, bringing Montenegro's cumulative disbursements under the Facility to 89.3 million EUR. The Commission's decision therefore confirmed substantive

progress, but at a lower amount than the government's conditional projection. This gap should not be framed as a simple contradiction: government reports initiate the payment process, whereas the Commission conducts the final verification against the Facility's payment conditions. Nevertheless, it underscores the importance of distinguishing reported completion from EU-validated delivery. A local NGO has criticised the presentation of self-assessed results as settled achievements, arguing that inflated reporting can obscure institutional capacity constraints and delay both reforms and funding (Vijesti, 2026).

A major milestone was the alignment of Montenegro's visa regime with the EU's common visa policy. On 23 July 2026, the government adopted amendments to the Decree on the Visa Regime, under which nationals of Belarus, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey will require visas to enter Montenegro from 1 November 2026. The government presented this measure as fulfilling a closing benchmark for Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) and a key Reform Agenda commitment under the EU Growth Plan. Montenegro also maintained close alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, including EU restrictive measures responding to Russia's destabilising activities and aggression against Ukraine.

Finally, the provisional closure of Chapter 31 (Foreign, Security and Defense Policy) remained blocked by Croatia from late 2024. The outstanding bilateral issues identified by Zagreb remained unresolved despite continued bilateral contacts. The case demonstrates how a single member state can prevent the provisional closure of an accession chapter by withholding its consent, even where the candidate country has technically advanced in the negotiations (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, 2026). This veto stems from unresolved bilateral and identity disputes, most notably claims over the ship "*Jadran*", the unsettled maritime border at Prevlaka, wartime reparations for the Morinj camp, and heightened political tensions

following the Montenegrin Parliament's 2024 resolution on Jasenovac. Leveraging the EU's unanimity rule, Zagreb has conditioned the chapter's closure on resolving these historical and territorial grievances prior to accession.

Montenegro's accession dynamics during this period therefore reflected a dual reality: rapid technical progress and stronger institutional preparation for accession on the one hand, and implementation, constitutional, and bilateral vulnerabilities on the other. Maintaining the government's target of accession in 2028 will require more than rapid chapter closures. It will depend on the quality and durability of domestic reforms, the fulfilment of constitutional and rule-of-law commitments, and sustained diplomacy to resolve outstanding bilateral issues in line with the EU principle of good-neighbourly relations.

Domestic political dynamics and internal dialogue on the EU

Domestically, Montenegro's political landscape was marked by tensions over security-sector governance and by pragmatic cross-party bargaining around EU-related reforms. In response to the adoption of amendments to the Law on the National Security Agency (ANB) and the Law on Internal Affairs in March 2026, opposition parties boycotted parliamentary work and withdrew from leadership positions in several committees, including those responsible for European integration and anti-corruption. They argued that the legislation weakened safeguards against political influence and reduced effective parliamentary oversight of the security sector.

A partial political compromise followed on 7 July 2026, when the parliamentary majority and part of the opposition signed an agreement reached with the facilitation of the EU Delegation to Montenegro. The agreement provided for further amendments to the ANB and internal-affairs legislation, a body to monitor their implementation, broader consensus

on parliamentary appointments, and the completion of constitutional-amendment procedures by 4 September 2026.

The agreement contributed to renewed institutional cooperation. On 16 July, Parliament elected the remaining two judges of the Constitutional Court. Separately, on 24 August, Parliament adopted constitutional amendments concerning the Judicial Council, the Prosecutorial Council, and the independence of the Central Bank of Montenegro (Central Bank of Montenegro, 2026). These measures strengthened certain elements of judicial governance and institutional independence.

Ruling coalition stability remained fragile throughout the period, marked by two cabinet reconstructions: the first on 14 April 2025, which rebalanced the governing coalition, and the second on 23 July 2026, which expanded and reconfigured the executive following internal political tensions. The political equilibrium had already been changed in January 2026, when the Democratic People's Party (DNP) withdrew from the government and ended its support for the governing coalition following disputes over identity-related demands and regional policy. DNP's conduct was widely understood in the context of its close political alignment with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and the wider pro-Serbian political network in Montenegro. Its withdrawal of support, together with its resistance to elements of the government's EU-oriented agenda, illustrated how domestic politics could be used to constrain Montenegro's pro-European momentum.

Regional pressures increasingly entered the domestic political arena. On 28 August 2026, Prime Minister Milojko Spajić warned that the expected closing of Montenegro's remaining EU negotiation chapters could be accompanied by hybrid actions by two neighbouring countries.

Compounding these ideological rifts, Parliament Speaker Andrija Mandić provoked strong domestic and regional reactions on 27 August 2026 by extending condolences to the son of Ratko Mladić, a convicted war

criminal who died that day while serving a life sentence in The Hague. Mandić stated that he had acted in his own name and on behalf of his party, rather than formally on behalf of Parliament. Nevertheless, domestic civil-society actors, the Office of the President, and Croatian officials condemned the gesture as an unacceptable relativisation of Mladić's crimes. The episode illustrated how historical revisionism among senior political figures can challenge Montenegro's commitment to the European values of accountability, reconciliation, and respect for international criminal justice.

Overall, the domestic political picture revealed a persistent tension between formal progress towards EU accession and the fragility of the political environment required to sustain it. Coalition instability, disputes over security-sector governance, external and hybrid pressures, and competing narratives about the region's wartime past demonstrated that technical progress in accession negotiations must be matched by durable democratic institutions, political accountability, and a clear commitment to European rule-of-law and reconciliation standards.

Voice from the region

This unprecedented technical momentum and legislative acceleration have re-energised Podgorica's reform agenda, temporarily consolidating a broad parliamentary majority around EU-related priorities. This culminated in the decision to establish the Ad hoc Working Party on Drafting the Accession Treaty with Montenegro, moving to the final structural phase of negotiations.

However, sustaining this trajectory requires navigating several intricate operational, political, and strategic challenges. At the operational level, Podgorica faces a formidable quantitative hurdle to provisionally close a large volume of remaining chapters by the end of the year in order to meet the government's ambitious roadmap, requiring

unflagging administrative capacity backed by robust, verifiable track records in key rule-of-law areas. Concurrently, significant uncertainty surrounds how the European Commission and member states will structure safeguard clauses in the Accession Treaty. Accession treaties must act as functional governance tools that bridge the gap between candidate status and full integration; treaty safeguards need to balance rigorous enforcement mechanisms with tangible incentives, ensuring post-accession compliance while avoiding structural frameworks that could permanently relegate candidate states to a secondary status (Marović & Barbullushi, 2026).

Beyond internal technical hurdles, external bilateral friction presents a persistent threat to negotiation timelines, most notably the unresolved dispute with Croatia over historical narratives, border issues, and property claims, which risks hijacking the merit-based process through unilateral blockades. This external risk is further compounded by a core internal contradiction within the domestic political landscape, where elements of the governing parliamentary majority publicly support convicted war criminals and promote historical revisionism, standing in direct opposition to foundational European values and risking institutional backsliding. Ultimately, foreign pressure campaigns actively exploit these domestic vulnerabilities, as evidenced by the Prime Minister's public warning regarding intensifying hybrid threats and coordinated disinformation campaigns originating from two neighbouring states aimed at destabilising the accession trajectory. While geopolitical urgency has provided a powerful catalyst, Montenegro's long-term integration depends on resolving these deep-seated structural, value-based, and security vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

For Montenegro to successfully transition from technical advancement to full membership, European political momentum must be matched by unyielding domestic commitment to core democratic values, robust rule-of-law execution, and carefully designed structural safeguards by the EU that secure long-term stability.

NORTH MACEDONIA

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Formal state of EU-North Macedonia relations, September 2025-August 2026

Relations between North Macedonia and the European Union between September 2025 and August 2026 were characterised by an increasingly pronounced divergence between formal accession and functional integration. While political dialogue remained intensive and implementation of the EU Growth Plan accelerated considerably, the formal accession process remained blocked. North Macedonia had still not opened the Fundamentals cluster or any negotiating chapter, despite having completed the screening process in December 2023. The European Commission's 2025 Enlargement Report reiterated that the next step remained the adoption of the constitutional amendments agreed in the context of the July 2022 Council conclusions, including the recognition of Bulgarians in the Constitution. At the same time, the Commission called for stronger progress in judicial independence, integrity, and the fight against corruption, demonstrating that the bilateral blockage does not exhaust the country's outstanding reform challenges (European Commission, 2025e).

High-level political engagement nevertheless continued throughout the period. In October 2025, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen visited Skopje during her annual Western Balkans tour and met Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, and Parliament Speaker Afrim Gashi. The tour explicitly

combined discussions on accession with gradual access to the Single Market and implementation of the 6 billion EUR Growth Plan (European Commission, 2025f). In December, Mickoski participated in the EU–Western Balkans Summit in Brussels. The summit reaffirmed enlargement as a strategic priority, although the widening regional differentiation was becoming increasingly apparent: Albania and Montenegro continued to advance formally while North Macedonia remained outside the process of opening and closing chapters (European Council, 2025).

Institutional contacts intensified further during 2026. The 19th EU–North Macedonia Stabilisation and Association Committee met in February and welcomed progress in the implementation of the Reform Agenda, while emphasising both reforms under the Fundamentals cluster and delayed measures approaching the end of their grace periods (European Commission, 2026f). The most important political visit came on 2 June, when European Council President António Costa met Mickoski in Skopje. Costa praised North Macedonia's recent Reform Agenda performance and its alignment with EU foreign policy, but simultaneously reiterated that adopting the agreed constitutional amendments remained the necessary next step for formally advancing accession negotiations (European Council, 2026a). Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos delivered a similar message during her July visit to Skopje: North Macedonia had demonstrated that it could deliver reforms "decisively and in time", particularly under the Reform Agenda, but the accession track itself still required political movement. By then, the country had received 142.1 million EUR under the Reform and Growth Facility (European Commission, 2026a).

Indeed, the Growth Plan represents the clearest area of advancement compared with the previous year. North Macedonia has a programmed allocation of 750.4 million EUR under the Reform and Growth Facility for 2024–2027 (European Commission, 2025e). In October 2025, the Commission approved a second regular disbursement of 15.9

million EUR, including 7.4 million EUR in direct budget support, and the remainder for infrastructure investments through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (European Commission, 2025c). A substantially larger payment followed in May 2026, when the Commission released 65.7 million EUR following a positive assessment of reforms, particularly in education and digitalisation (European Commission, 2026d). By July 2026, the total funds released under the Facility had reached 142.1 million EUR, demonstrating that the performance-based logic of the Growth Plan had begun producing tangible financial benefits even in the absence of progress in accession negotiations (European Commission, 2026b).

This positive performance should nevertheless be qualified. The Commission continues to identify weaknesses in administrative and implementation capacity. The 2025 Country Report recorded more than 122 million EUR in cumulative automatic decommitments under an existing multiannual EU programme due to weak administrative capacity (European Commission, 2025a). Thus, North Macedonia presents a somewhat contradictory picture: it is successfully implementing enough targeted Reform Agenda milestones to unlock new Growth Plan financing while continuing to face structural difficulties in implementing and absorbing EU assistance.

Overall, the period therefore represents intensification without accession advancement. Compared with 2024–2025, EU–North Macedonia relations have become more substantive economically and institutionally, with considerably larger Growth Plan disbursements and deeper sectoral cooperation. Yet the fundamental political equation has not changed. The government continues to demand stronger guarantees concerning Bulgaria before proceeding with constitutional amendments, while the EU maintains that the existing commitments must first be fulfilled. North Macedonia is consequently becoming progressively more integrated with the EU in practical terms while remaining

institutionally frozen at the beginning of the formal accession process.

Internal dialogue on the EU

The domestic debate on the European Union between September 2025 and August 2026 continued to revolve around an apparent paradox: support for EU membership was recovering, while distrust of the accession process and dissatisfaction with the EU's treatment of North Macedonia remained pronounced. The political debate therefore cannot adequately be described as a simple confrontation between pro-European and Eurosceptic forces. Instead, an increasingly important distinction has emerged between support for the EU as North Macedonia's strategic destination and acceptance of the political conditions under which accession is currently expected to proceed.

The Eurometer 2026, conducted by Eurothink on a representative sample of 1,001 respondents during the period of May–June 2026, provides especially clear evidence of this phenomenon. Support for the proposition that EU membership would be a good thing increased from 53% in 2023 to 58% in 2026, partially reversing the sharp decline recorded after 2021. More significantly, 66% now regard the EU as the best development alternative for North Macedonia, up from 61% in 2023 and the highest level recorded by Eurometer since measurements began in 2014. Expectations have also recovered: 23% believe membership could occur within five years, compared with only 10% in 2023 (Eurothink, 2026).

Yet this renewed European orientation has not translated into renewed trust in the EU itself. Sixty percent of respondents describe the EU's attitude towards North Macedonia as unfair, arrogant, and coercive, up from 56% in 2023, while only 18% regard it as fair, friendly, and correct, down from 28%. Eurothink consequently identifies a central paradox in contemporary public opinion: citizens increasingly

distinguish between "the EU as a goal" and "the accession process". This distinction is reinforced by the reasons citizens provide for their attitudes. Among supporters, the leading motivation is a better standard of living (58%), followed by employment and investment (32%), and stronger democracy and rule of law (31%). Among opponents, however, loss of national identity is the dominant concern (49%), while 37% believe membership would bring additional externally imposed conditions without meaningful improvement (Eurothink, 2026).

Other surveys reinforce this picture while adding an important political dimension. The IDSCS/KAS longitudinal survey conducted in late 2025 found that approximately 70% regarded EU membership as important and recorded a substantial recovery of support among ethnic Macedonians. Nevertheless, only 24% supported proceeding with the constitutional amendments, while 27% preferred renegotiating the 2022 framework. The ethnic cleavage remained substantial: 57% of ethnic Albanian respondents supported constitutional change compared with only 11% of ethnic Macedonians (Damjanovski, 2026; IDSCS, 2026). The 2026 WeBalkans survey similarly found that 67% would vote for EU membership (WeBalkans, 2026). The different figures reflect different survey questions, but their overall direction is consistent: North Macedonia has not undergone a wholesale Eurosceptic turn; rather, pro-membership sentiment coexists with strong conditionality scepticism.

This contradiction closely mirrors the country's political debate. The governing VMRO-DPMNE continues to describe EU membership as the country's only strategic option while refusing to implement the constitutional amendments under the existing conditions. Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski has repeatedly demanded guarantees that constitutional change would lead to a predictable accession process without further bilateral or identity-related conditions. In March 2026, he explicitly linked his refusal to concerns about Macedonian identity and the absence of a clear endpoint

to the process (MIA, 2026). This framing resonates with the Eurometer finding that a majority simultaneously considers EU membership desirable and the EU's treatment of the country unfair.

The opposition SDSM has taken the opposite position on the immediate political choice, arguing that fulfilment of the commitments contained in the existing negotiating framework is necessary to unblock accession. In May 2026, party leader Venko Filipče explicitly offered to share political responsibility with the government for adopting the constitutional amendments and for the subsequent course of negotiations, arguing that continued failure to take this step jeopardised the country's European future (SDSM, 2026a). SDSM therefore increasingly portrayed the government's search for additional guarantees and changes to the negotiating conditions as a source of self-imposed stagnation. The rapid advancement of Albania and Montenegro strengthened this argument by demonstrating that enlargement itself was no longer dormant.

Differences were also visible within the Albanian political bloc. DUI and the European Front adopted the clearest position in favour of immediate constitutional change. In April 2026, European Front MPs launched an initiative to collect the 30 parliamentary signatures required to formally initiate constitutional amendments, describing them as a necessary institutional step for unblocking European integration. VLEN, although maintaining its strategic commitment to EU membership and constitutional amendments, rejected the European Front initiative and adopted a more cautious position from within the governing coalition, emphasising the importance of predictability regarding what would follow constitutional change (Trpchevska-Zafirovska, 2026). At the harder Eurosceptic end of the political spectrum, Levica remained firmly opposed to accepting the constitutional-amendment route under the existing conditions (Levica, n.d.). The debate therefore increasingly cut not simply between pro- and anti-European parties, but

between competing interpretations of how, and under what guarantees, North Macedonia should fulfil the conditions attached to accession.

The comparison with other candidate countries has made this disagreement increasingly salient. Albania's and Montenegro's advancement has weakened the older argument that enlargement itself is effectively dormant. Conversely, the government can point to North Macedonia's successful implementation of Reform Agenda milestones and access to Growth Plan financing as evidence that the country can deliver EU-related reforms even while formal negotiations remain blocked. The result is a domestic debate increasingly divided between merit-based integration and conditionality-based accession: whether North Macedonia should first fulfil the commitments already incorporated into the negotiating framework or whether the EU should first provide greater political certainty that fulfilling them will actually lead to further progress towards accession.

At the same time, Eurometer suggests that citizens are becoming more engaged with substantive European issues. Daily consumption of information concerning North Macedonia and the EU increased from 48% in 2023 to almost 60% in 2026. Citizens also attach exceptionally high importance to concrete accession-related policy areas: justice, freedom and security; judiciary and fundamental rights; social policy and employment; and other sectoral reforms are overwhelmingly considered important (Eurothink, 2026). This indicates that the EU debate cannot be reduced entirely to Bulgaria and identity politics. There remains a strong societal expectation that European integration should produce better governance, economic opportunities, and institutional reform.

The internal dialogue on the EU is therefore characterised less by straightforward Euroscepticism than by support without trust. Citizens increasingly reaffirm the EU as North Macedonia's preferred strategic destination while simultaneously questioning the fairness and credibility

of the path offered to reach it. Eurothink's conclusion that 2026 brought a moderate recovery of pro-European attitudes "without restoring confidence in the credibility of the European accession process" captures this tension particularly well (Eurothink, 2026). The central challenge for both domestic political actors and the EU is consequently no longer merely to maintain public support for membership, but to restore confidence that accession remains a predictable, merit-based, and ultimately attainable process.

Expert voice from the region

One year later, the central conclusion regarding North Macedonia's relationship with the EU requires an important modification. The geopolitical turn in enlargement can no longer convincingly be described as merely rhetorical. During 2025–2026, enlargement acquired tangible political momentum: Montenegro accelerated the closure of negotiating chapters, Albania moved from opening all clusters to provisionally closing its first chapters, while Ukraine and Moldova also advanced in their negotiations. On 14 July 2026 alone, the EU held accession conferences with four candidate countries – Albania, Montenegro, Moldova and Ukraine – explicitly presenting this as evidence of a renewed enlargement dynamic (Council of the European Union, 2026f). The geopolitical turn is therefore increasingly a new reality for enlargement as a whole, but not yet for North Macedonia.

The contrast with North Macedonia has consequently become considerably sharper. Montenegro has opened all 33 chapters and, by July 2026, provisionally closed 18; the Council has even established an ad hoc working party to prepare its future Accession Treaty (Council of the European Union, 2026e; 2026h). Albania, which was separated from North Macedonia's accession track in 2024, has subsequently opened all 33 negotiating chapters, fulfilled the interim benchmarks for the Fundamentals cluster, and

provisionally closed its first three chapters in July 2026 (Council of the European Union, 2026b). North Macedonia, meanwhile, remains where it was a year earlier: screening has been completed, but no cluster has been formally opened. What initially appeared to be a temporary divergence following the decoupling from Albania is therefore becoming a structural gap.

This does not mean that EU–North Macedonia relations have deteriorated. On the contrary, the evidence presented in the previous sections suggests intensification without accession advancement. Political contacts remained frequent, Reform Agenda implementation generated substantial financial disbursements, and gradual integration increasingly gives citizens and businesses access to benefits normally associated with closer EU integration. By July 2026, 142.1 million EUR had been released to North Macedonia under the Reform and Growth Facility (European Commission, 2026b). The relationship is therefore becoming deeper in practical terms, even while the formal accession process remains frozen. This produces an increasingly important distinction between functional integration and accession integration: North Macedonia is progressively participating in EU programmes, policies, markets, and financial mechanisms without becoming institutionally closer to membership.

This model has advantages. The Growth Plan makes European integration more tangible, rewards reforms before membership, and reduces the costs of prolonged accession. Yet it also carries a political risk for North Macedonia. If functional integration continues while accession negotiations remain blocked, gradual integration can unintentionally make prolonged stagnation more sustainable. It may provide enough benefits to preserve the country's European orientation without generating sufficient political pressure on either side to resolve the underlying blockage. The Eurometer 2026 results make this danger particularly visible: support for membership has recovered and 66% regard the

EU as the country's best development alternative, but 60% simultaneously perceive the EU's treatment of North Macedonia as unfair, arrogant, and coercive (Eurothink, 2026). Functional integration can therefore sustain pro-European orientation, but it cannot by itself restore the credibility of accession.

Responsibility for the stalemate should nevertheless not be attributed exclusively to the EU. The bilateralisation of the accession process and repeated identity-related disputes have damaged the credibility of EU conditionality in North Macedonia, but the government has also chosen not to implement commitments already incorporated into the negotiating framework. Moreover, shortcomings concerning the judiciary, corruption, public administration, and implementation capacity would remain relevant even if the Bulgarian dispute disappeared (European Commission, 2025e). The crucial challenge for North Macedonia is therefore to avoid allowing a legitimate debate about the predictability of EU conditionality to become a substitute for domestic reform. Likewise, the EU needs to demonstrate that once agreed conditions are fulfilled, progress follows rapidly and predictably. The advancement of Albania and Montenegro provides stronger evidence of this possibility than existed one year ago.

The answer to the question posed by this publication is consequently more nuanced than it was in 2025. The EU's geopolitical turn towards the Western Balkans is becoming a reality, but North Macedonia risks becoming an exception to this trend. The principal danger is no longer that the EU has abandoned enlargement. Rather, it is that enlargement accelerates around North Macedonia while the country remains caught between successful functional integration and political inability to enter the negotiating process. Breaking this pattern requires movement from both sides: credible guarantees that merit-based progress will be rewarded by the EU, but also political leadership in North Macedonia capable of fulfilling existing commitments while

simultaneously pursuing substantive reforms. Otherwise, the country may become increasingly Europeanised without becoming appreciably closer to EU membership.

SERBIA

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Serbia-EU relations

From September 2025 to September 2026, Serbia's relations with the European Union remained formally active but politically constrained. Serbia continued to be treated as a candidate country with accession negotiations open since 2014. However, the formal state of play has not changed since 2021: of 35 negotiating chapters, only 22 have been opened, and two have been provisionally closed. Progress continued to depend primarily on rule-of-law reforms, democratic standards, foreign-policy alignment, and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. On all of these questions, reforms have been limited or have even experienced backsliding, despite the Serbian government's declaration that EU membership is a strategic goal.

In October 2025, the European Parliament (EP) issued a Resolution on polarisation and increased repression in Serbia, one year after the Novi Sad railway-station tragedy. The resolution linked the unresolved investigation, pressure on protesters, journalists and civil society, and concerns over democratic backsliding to the broader credibility of Serbia's European path (European Parliament, 2025). The EP also called on the Commission to initiate a procedure to impose targeted individual sanctions against those responsible for law and human rights violations in Serbia, which never materialised. Earlier, in September 2025, the European People's Party (EPP) launched an internal review of the associate membership of Serbia's ruling SNS,

but no final decision followed. The Serbian authorities rejected the EP resolution's findings, describing them as politically biased and as interference in domestic affairs. Consequently, in January 2026, the highest authorities (i.e. the Serbian President and the National Assembly Speaker) refused to meet with the EP's delegation visiting Belgrade for a fact-finding mission (Karović, 2026a). In November 2025, the Commission published its Serbia Report, finding that Serbia remained committed to EU membership and had made progress in some technical and economic areas, but that overall advancement in the accession process continued to be hindered by limited progress on the rule of law, democratic governance, and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. At the same time, the Commission reaffirmed that accession remains a merit-based process requiring stronger political commitment and more effective implementation of reforms (European Commission, 2025g).

Relations with the EU were further strained by disagreements over enlargement and frictions with neighbouring countries. Serbian leadership boycotted the annual EU–Western Balkans Summit on 17 December 2025 in Brussels, as President Aleksandar Vučić announced that no national officials would attend. This absence served as a protest against the Council of the European Union's failure to open Cluster 3 in Serbia's accession negotiations after the Commission issued several positive opinions about Serbia's technical readiness. Vučić nevertheless attended the summit in Tivat, Montenegro in June 2026, after consultations with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and despite explicit warnings from Serbia's security services that travelling to Montenegro posed a high security risk. The Tivat Summit was marked by tension, involving a major border security incident before the conference and a direct political confrontation on the floor. Just before the summit, Montenegrin police and the National Security Agency (ANB) grounded a charter flight from Belgrade at Tivat Airport and blocked 87 Serbian men from entering the country, claiming

the group posed a credible risk to national security, as many of the men had criminal records (Obradović, 2026).

Regarding the accession-related reforms, in early 2026 the Serbian Government established a high-level Operational Team to accelerate domestic reforms. However, domestic critics and analysts dismissed the initiative as mere "technical manoeuvring", pointing out that this was the country's third structural reorganisation in four years and that the true obstacles to integration are deep political issues rather than administrative deficiencies (Centre for Contemporary Politics, 2026). Tensions deepened after the simultaneous enactment of the controversial "Mrdić laws", which Brussels warned would severely hinder the rule of law and curtail judicial independence. After Brussels threatened to put Western Balkans Growth Plan funding at risk, the Serbian parliament made a tactical reversal in June 2026, passing a new package of amendments to realign the judicial framework with the Venice Commission's opinion. This did not unblock Serbia's EU integration path, despite another Commission recommendation in July 2026 to the Council to open Cluster III (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth) with Serbia. Several member states opposed it, citing rule-of-law concerns, foreign policy alignment, and Serbia's strategic orientation.

So far, the Reform and Growth Facility has remained frozen for Serbia due to rule-of-law backsliding associated with the adoption of "Mrdić laws", as well as failure to meet the overall preconditions and to fulfil the reform steps envisaged in its Reform Agenda that are necessary for payouts (Savremena politika, 2026). As a result, and following the expiry of the reform grace period in June 2026, Serbia is facing the possibility of losing around 450 million EUR from the fund. Serbia's Reform Agenda envisaged 98 reform steps across the business environment and private-sector development, green and digital transition, human capital, and fundamentals. The envelope available to Serbia amounted to around 1.58 billion EUR until the end

of 2027, with payments conditional on the implementation of reforms, compliance with rule-of-law requirements, and constructive engagement in the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue. Serbia received pre-financing in June 2025 and submitted further payment requests in 2026, including a fourth request in July 2026.

In foreign policy, Serbia pursued a strategy of selective compliance with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). While increasing formal CFSP alignment to 63% (European Commission, 2025g) and maintaining cooperation with the EU on issues such as sanctions circumvention, Belgrade continued to resist joining sanctions against Russia and preserved close political ties with Moscow and Beijing.

Finally, in the latest friction between Belgrade and the EU, in September 2026, EU Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos cancelled a planned visit to Belgrade, arguing that the public honours and perceived glorification surrounding the funeral of convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić were "incompatible" with the values underpinning EU accession (Euractiv, 2026; European Western Balkans, 2026c).

Internal dialogue on the EU

The domestic debate on the EU in Serbia during the analysed period was highly polarised and increasingly shaped by the broader political crisis that followed the Novi Sad railway-station tragedy of November 2024 and the subsequent student-led protests. A paradoxical combination of continued societal support for reforms and declining trust in the accession process appears to reflect a captured media environment. While the EU remained Serbia's largest trading partner and donor, public perceptions of the Union remained ambivalent and were often shaped by competing geopolitical narratives. Recent surveys indicate a modest recovery in support for EU membership, although it remains under 50%. Support remains strongest among younger citizens

and is primarily associated with expectations of higher living standards, freedom of movement, stricter rule-of-law and anti-corruption reforms (Delegation of the European Union, 2026; European Policy Centre, 2026).

At the same time, Serbia continues to rank among the most Eurosceptic societies in the Western Balkans. Comparative regional surveys show considerably lower levels of trust in the EU than in several neighbouring candidate countries (Regional Cooperation Council, 2025), while positive perceptions of Russia and China remain relatively high. A substantial proportion of Serbian citizens believe that the EU applies double standards in enlargement policy, continuously introduces new political conditions, or is primarily motivated by strategic interests rather than democratic values. Public opinion research also reveals persistent scepticism regarding the likelihood of accession, with many respondents doubting that Serbia will become a member state in the foreseeable future (Regional Cooperation Council, 2025).

The media landscape has played a central role in shaping these attitudes. Assessments by international media-monitoring organisations continue to identify Serbia as a case of extensive media capture, characterised by political influence over major television broadcasters, unequal access to audiences, pressure on independent journalists, and the concentration of pro-government narratives across the dominant media sphere (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2026). In this environment, the EU is frequently presented as a demanding and inconsistent actor, while Russia is often portrayed as Serbia's traditional ally and a reliable defender of national interests. At the same time, rare independent media, digital platforms and investigative outlets have increasingly challenged official narratives and provided more critical reporting on Serbia's democratic trajectory and EU accession process.

The political opposition also underwent important changes. Following the wave of anti-corruption protests

triggered by the Novi Sad tragedy, pro-European opposition parties somewhat increased efforts to overcome fragmentation and coordinate electoral strategies. While mutual differences remained significant, the prospect of parliamentary elections encouraged more opposition parties to converge around common issues with clearly pro-EU parties associated with the EU agenda, including rule-of-law reforms, media freedom, anti-corruption measures, and electoral fairness (Karović, 2026b). As elections near, however, more and more opposition parties are dropping out and declaring their support for the Students' List.

The student movement emerged as the most significant new political and social actor. Initially mobilised around demands for accountability, transparency, and institutional responsibility, students gradually transformed their networks into a nationwide structure capable of supporting electoral mobilisation and monitoring. The movement largely avoided adopting an explicit position on EU membership and instead emphasised universal democratic principles, institutional accountability, the rule of law, and resistance to corruption (Karović, 2026b). By 2026, student activists had begun preparing for anticipated elections through voter outreach, observer training, and grassroots campaigning, while largely maintaining their independence from established political parties. Finally, the student movement's electoral list was recently declared, meaning it will be the only real challenger to the ruling party in the October 2026 elections.

In parliament and in pro-government media, the EU was often presented as both Serbia's most important economic partner and a political actor whose criticism of domestic governance was selective or externally motivated. This dual message allowed the authorities to preserve formal accession language while cultivating strategic balancing and enhancing anti-Western narratives.

The student protests added a distinctive dimension to the internal EU dialogue. They were far from a pro-EU

campaign, but their demands for accountability, transparency, and democratic procedures overlapped with the EU's fundamentals agenda. This created pressure on both Belgrade and Brussels. For Serbian authorities, the protests exposed the weakness of purely technical accession narratives. For the EU, they raised the question of whether stability-oriented engagement with political elites could coexist with stronger support for democratic standards and societal actors.

Expert voice from the region

Serbia–EU relations in the past year are best described as not advancing or remaining largely stagnant (on hold). The geopolitical turn in EU enlargement after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, together with renewed emphasis on the Western Balkans, created a more favourable strategic environment, but Serbia was unable to translate this momentum into faster accession negotiations. The EU's language became more geopolitical, but the conditionality remained: without credible progress on the rule of law, democratic institutions, media freedom, foreign-policy alignment, and Kosovo normalisation, technical preparedness, coupled with geopolitical pressures, was insufficient. Not only did some member states remain strict in their insistence on the merit-based process despite geopolitical pressures, but the student-led protests and the EP's increased attention to the country made it hard to turn a blind eye to Serbia's democratic and rule-of-law deficiencies.

The key challenge is the credibility gap on both sides. Serbia's leadership has continued to present accession as a strategic and economic framework while avoiding reforms that would significantly limit executive dominance or require full geopolitical alignment with the EU. The EU, meanwhile, has struggled to balance geopolitical urgency with its own merit-based standards. If it advances negotiations without visible reforms, it risks weakening conditionality;

if it blocks movement more openly or formally, it might lose Serbia to other geopolitical actors and strengthen Eurosceptic arguments that accession is unattainable.

The main change compared to the previous year was not a breakthrough in the accession negotiations, but a division among EU actors over whether technical readiness should be separate from political conditionality or whether the two should remain closely connected through a strict, merit-based approach to the opening of clusters. Cluster 3 had long been assessed as technically ready, yet its opening became a test of whether Serbia could demonstrate credible progress on the fundamentals. There are also fears that new cluster openings would send the wrong signal amid domestic polarisation, concerns over media freedom and electoral conditions, and Serbia's insufficient alignment with the EU's CFSP, especially after scheduling the parliamentary elections in Serbia for 25 October 2026.

The possibilities for improvement lie in strengthening the EU's conditionality credibility despite perceived geopolitical urgency. Using available instruments to sanction non-compliance and more open high-level political criticism of the most responsible ruling elites would support genuinely pro-EU and reform-oriented actors in Serbia. The Growth Plan, IPA, and differentiated integration should make the EU more tangible to citizens and businesses, and less conducive to the regime's interest in remaining in power. In other words, Brussels should communicate more directly with Serbian society, including students and universities, rather than relying only on government-to-government channels.

The analysed period suggests that Serbia remains deeply connected to the EU economically and institutionally, but the accession process is slowed by domestic democratic deficits, unresolved territorial issues, and strategic ambiguity. The geopolitical narrative has opened a window of opportunity, yet it has not, by itself, generated a genuinely new dynamic.

CONCLUSIONS

The last year reveals increased, yet differentiated dynamics in the relations between the Western Balkans and the European Union. Despite the existing hurdles, Montenegro's membership perspective and Albania's opening of additional chapters spark enthusiasm, while relations with the other non-member states in the region raise more questions than answers.

The political situation in Serbia remains the "elephant in the room". The EU failed to unequivocally condemn Vučić's oppressive measures against the students' protests. The critical remarks of EU officials and simultaneous meetings with the Serbian authorities produced a sense of ambiguity and confusion as to the EU's real priorities, especially in light of the fact that the popular demands for transparency and accountability are supposedly the core of the EU's normative power and merit-based conditionality. From the Serbian perspective, the EU has become hostage to its own softness. On the one hand, it is skilfully exploited by the Serbian authorities, which indirectly blame the EU for the endless Kosovo saga; on the other hand, the EU maintains relations with the same elites who discredit and shame the EU domestically. Simultaneously, the lack of a clear EU position was being exploited to introduce anti-EU undertones among segments of the anti-government protesters, which further weakened the EU's standing in Serbia. The double standards applied towards Belgrade have long-term negative consequences for the EU, which is increasingly being perceived as hypocritical and inconsistent. Ratko Mladić's funeral epitomises the attitude of the current Serbian authorities towards the EU. Behind the formal closeness, the regime nurtures a contradiction to the EU's core values and principles. This same regime de facto directly undermines EU efforts in the other Western Balkan candidate states.

In North Macedonia, the Mickoski government's "identity first" efforts to renegotiate the negotiating framework and/or obtain additional guarantees for the recognition of Macedonian identity have been counterproductive and have de facto led to a paralysis of North Macedonia's advancement towards the EU. The skilfully steered public mobilisation around the defence of national identity de-prioritises the enlargement perspective. The frequent formal meetings between Macedonian representatives and the EU do not translate into tangible advancement, which Mickoski's government has sought to compensate for with accelerated infrastructural investments (expected also by foreign partners), and by extrapolating cordial acknowledgements for the implementation of its reform agenda from EU officials.

In Albania, the tangible advancement of the negotiations process, particularly the opening of all chapters, is taking place in the shadow of the "Flamingo Revolution", which has exposed the popular discontent with Rama's grip over Albanian politics. Sooner or later, this may become a challenge for the EU in a way similar to the ambiguous relations with Vučić. So far, Albanian authorities treat the opening of all negotiation chapters as a success, but the real test will come with the efforts for their closure. Still, Tirana needs not only to maintain the momentum, but also to find an effective way to depoliticise the enlargement process and mitigate the concentration of power.

The Bosnian authorities are unable to meet the EU's expectations on judicial legislation, appointment of the Chief Negotiator, and the implementation of the Reform Agenda, practically halting the accession process. However, Dodik's removal from power might provide more favourable conditions for a constructive approach towards the EU. The simultaneous introduction of new EU regulations, which directly increase the costs of interaction with the EU, the internal political limbo and the costs of domestic implementation of EU regulations contribute to a sense of confusion and mistrust.

Kosovo remains caught between its unresolved status with Serbia and the internal inability to deliver a stable political environment. The internal efforts to consolidate power and eliminate sources of instability steered by the current authorities in Belgrade clash with EU expectations concerning the rule of law and multiethnic institutional inclusion. Kurti has also been unable to find a durable solution for the minority issues in Kosovo. A source of concern is the lack of any progress in the Belgrade–Prishtina dialogue.

Montenegro's progress over the past year represents the most promising enlargement-related development in the Western Balkans. However, apart from the advancement in the negotiations process, the authorities in Podgorica require strong support, especially in light of the external attempts at destabilisation and the need to sustain the domestic consensus on enlargement. This should include unequivocal political support for membership among the EU member states and close monitoring of the durability of the domestic reforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The country reports identify credibility as an important challenge in recent relations between the EU and the Western Balkans. Although for differing reasons, the belief that enlargement is a viable perspective is questioned in Serbia, Bosnia, and North Macedonia. While majorities in these countries support European integration, there is little hope that this process will occur in the near future, which discourages public mobilisation and weakens the public expectation towards political elites to deliver tangible steps on the road to membership.
- Another dimension of credibility is related to the tangible advancement of the enlargement process. The enlargement-related successes of one country tend to spill over to other candidates. This trend, however, needs to be maintained. Montenegro's membership perspective has immense potential to encourage a new wave of enlargement-related mobilisation. However, in order to be successful, the EU needs to secure the uninterrupted completion of the negotiations and admission process. Montenegro's membership perspective provides, for the first time in over a dozen years, tangible proof that the EU is not just a remote promise. The EU should launch a public campaign among the candidate countries promoting Montenegro's success and encouraging public mobilisation.
- The lack of EU symbols in popular protests in Serbia and Albania may indicate that there is a broken link between the EU's actions and its proclaimed values, which can hardly be defended through ambiguous relations with leaders such as Aleksandar Vučić and Edi Rama. As emphasised in the Serbian, Macedonian, and Bosnian cases, the EU needs to focus on bottom-up mobilisation, concentrating more resources in civil society, in order

to generate a new push on political elites to prioritise the accession process.

- The EU needs to align its enlargement communication strategy with the situation on the ground. When reforms are lacking, the EU should, at a high political level, clearly communicate, criticise, and impose sanctions targeting responsible stakeholders at national level. On the other hand, when reforms are real, the Commission should have a mandate to push the accession process further without much political discussion in the Council.
- The EU's credibility is also challenged by the state of democracy in the region. Even if popular support for the EU in most countries is predominantly positive, critical and ambiguous positions are also present and growing.
- The implementation of the Growth Plan provided a new model of financial encouragement, but also revealed the domestic institutional and structural weaknesses, which directly impact not only the efficiency of reforms, but also expose the limits of the national adaptation capacity. The evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia suggests that through earmarked funds, the EU should encourage the further enhancement of absorption capacity within the candidate states.
- The current enlargement policy reveals a particularly important pattern, well identified across the region. While citizens and companies increasingly adapt to EU rules, political elites continue to resist EU demands. Thus, while regulating the national environment, the EU has little success in transforming domestic politics and thus moving forward. Citizens in the region need to associate the EU with themselves rather than with the national political elites, which, as the paper shows, are not necessarily consistent in their pursuit of EU membership.

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