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From Norms to Noise:

Why the EU Talks Reform but Fuels Decline in the Balkans

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BiEPAG



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The EU frequently prioritizes short-term (geopolitical) stability over long-term democratic transformation, often favoring pragmatic alliances with ruling elites in the Western Balkans at the expense of fostering deep and sustainable institutional reforms. In doing so, the EU has, at critical moments, traded its foundational values, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, for interests, both pragmatic and strategic. This approach has produced a paradoxical dynamic: while formal integration, namely in the cases of Montenegro and Albania, has progressed, the quality and credibility of reforms have not. The region is now more institutionally connected to the EU than ever before. Yet, trust in the EU's normative power is low. A particularly troubling aspect of this dynamic is the persistent and widening gap between the EU's official political rhetoric, often overly optimistic and diplomatically cautious, and the far more critical assessments found in its own annual country reports, as well as the lived realities on the ground. This fosters mistrust and democratic backsliding, with democracy and the rule of law suffering most. To reconcile its rhetoric with reform efforts in the Western Balkans, the EU must adopt a clear integration plan, speak with one voice, and remain committed to its core values.

1. INTRODUCTION

The European Union's (EU) enlargement policy, once envisioned as a catalyst for stability and democratic transformation in the Western Balkans, has become increasingly reactive and inconsistent in recent years, shaped more by internal political dynamics than by strategic vision. This shift has eroded the credibility of the EU's conditionality framework, which rests on the principle that progress toward membership depends on demonstrable reforms in governance, the rule of law, and human rights.

A persistent and widening gap has emerged between the EU's official rhetoric, often optimistic and celebratory, and the more critical findings of European Commission's (EC) country reports and assessments from independent civil society and international observers. This discrepancy undermines the transformative potential of the accession process and contributes to mounting public disillusionment. In several Western Balkan states, declining trust in the EU is further exacerbated by domestic anti-EU narratives sometimes propagated even from official institutions, as in the case of Serbia – narratives that are tolerated, if not tacitly accepted, by Brussels. As a result, Serbian citizens exhibit the lowest level of trust in the EU compared to the rest of the region, with the most recent Eurobarometer showing a level of trust at just 37%.[1] Trust in the EU has weakened not only because of reform fatigue, but also due to the perception that EU messaging is politically motivated and detached from on-the-ground realities.

[1] 83% of citizens in Montenegro trust the EU. Source: European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 103: Spring 2025, fieldwork March–April 2025, Table "Trust in the EU – Candidate and Western Balkan Countries", https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372

The high point of EU engagement was arguably the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit[2], where the Union offered a clear and ambitious European perspective to the region. Since then, however, repeated delays, unfulfilled promises, and superficial praise have fueled a sense of stagnation.

This inconsistency is most evident in the contrast between high-level political endorsements and the sober tone of detailed country evaluations, which routinely highlight serious shortcomings in judicial independence, media freedom, and institutional accountability. Such contradictions have triggered a deeper crisis of confidence in the EU's enlargement agenda, one that cannot be addressed merely by floating speculative accession dates for frontrunners like Montenegro and Albania. Such contradictions have triggered a deeper crisis of confidence in the EU's enlargement agenda, one that cannot be addressed merely by floating speculative accession dates for frontrunners like Montenegro and Albania.[3]

In the absence of a coherent and principled enlargement policy, democratic backsliding has continued unchecked, and the EU's normative leverage has diminished significantly. Without a recalibration that aligns rhetoric with enforcement and measurable progress, the EU risks further weakening its influence in a region where geopolitical competitors are eager to fill the vacuum.

[2] European Council, EU–Western Balkans Summit Declaration, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/misc/76291.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[3] Kos, M. (2024). Hearing of Marta Kos: Enlargement to remain merit-based, some candidates could finish negotiations during the next Commission's term. European Western Balkans. Available at: https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/11/07/hearing-of-marta-kos-enlargement-to-remain-merit-based-some-candidates-could-finish-negotiations-during-the-next-commissions-term/

2. HOW EU INSINCERITY AFFECTS THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS: DOUBLE STANDARDS IN ACTION

The EU's credibility when it comes to enlargement is fundamentally rooted in its role as a normative power and an actor that promotes democratic values and expects candidate countries to align with them. However, when these expectations are not followed by consequences, or when political rhetoric praising reform contradicts verified democratic backsliding, the **EU's credibility erodes further. This erosion is not a theoretical risk, but a visible reality,** as evidenced by several key examples of the Union's inconsistent actions.

2.1. NORTH MACEDONIA: SACRIFICE BRINGS NO REWARD

Perhaps the most glaring case is that of North Macedonia. After making significant and tangible progress, including resolving a decades-long name dispute with Greece, the country was still denied the opening of accession negotiations.[4] This denial came despite years of reforms and sustained political efforts. The aftermath was politically destabilizing: the government that had invested considerable capital in resolving the bilateral issue fell, raising questions about whether the sacrifice was worth it.[5] The sense of betrayal was further compounded by the "decoupling" of North Macedonia from Albania, whose EU accession path is now progressing more rapidly as it opens negotiation clusters.[6] In 2022, public support in North Macedonia for the Open Balkan,[7] a controversial regional initiative often viewed as an alternative to EU membership and launched alongside Albania and Serbia, surpassed that for EU membership.

[4] Patrick Wintour, 'EU refusal to open talks with Albania and North Macedonia condemned as "historic mistake"', The Guardian (18 October 2019), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/18/eu-refusal-to-open-talks-with-albania-and-north-macedonia-condemned-as-historic-mistake

[5] North Macedonia, once a frontrunner after receiving candidate status as early as 2005, was later also blocked by Bulgaria and is now among the countries for which no projections can be made regarding potential EU membership.

[6] See also: Sébastien Maillard, Albania's Steep Road for Accession by 2030, Policy Brief, Jacques Delors Institute, November 2024, https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PB_241108_Albanie_Maillard_EN.pdf.

[7] The Open Balkan is a regional initiative launched in 2019 by Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, aiming to promote economic integration, free movement of people, goods, services, and capital among participating Western Balkan countries. However, it has drawn significant criticism for being non-transparent, incomplete, and politically motivated.

Specifically, 82% of citizens expressed support for the Open Balkan initiative,[8] while 73%[9] favored joining the EU. This disparity reflected growing public frustration with the stagnation of the EU accession process, and it persists to this day. The aforementioned Eurobarometer survey reveals that only 56% of North Macedonia citizens express trust in the EU.[10] Moreover, by allowing bilateral disputes and political decisions to take precedence over a merit-based approach and concrete results on the ground, as demonstrated by the recent case of Croatia blocking the closure of Chapter 31[11] in Montenegro's EU accession negotiations, rather than seeking a model to separate these two processes, the EU is further undermining its enlargement policy and its transformative power. Therefore, **decisions on whether to open or block accession chapters are increasingly driven by the domestic political agendas of EU member states, rather than by the candidate country's objective progress.** Diverging national interests among the EU27 and growing enlargement fatigue further delay consensus, prolonging accession timelines. This was also noted by the European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), which highlights how bilateral vetoes, such as Bulgaria's blockade of North Macedonia's accession talks, and divergent views among member states, dilute the Union's leverage over reform processes. This internal discord emboldens illiberal actors by signaling a lack of unified EU resolve, reducing the incentive for meaningful reforms.[12]

[8] International Republican Institute, IRI Western Balkans Poll Shows Support for Pro-Western Institutions, Persistent Ethnic Tensions, and Commitment to the Open Balkan Initiative, 29 June 2022, https://www.iri.org/news/iri-western-balkans-poll-shows-support-for-pro-western-institutions-persistent-ethnic-tensions-and-commitment-to-the-open-balkan-initiative/

[9] International Republican Institute, IRI North Macedonia Poll Finds Dissatisfaction with Country's Direction, Support for EU Membership, Increase in Positive Perceptions of Turkey and China, 19 December 2022, https://www.iri.org/news/iri-north-macedonia-poll-finds-dissatisfaction-with-countrys-direction-support-for-eu-membership-increase-in-positive-perceptions-of-turkey-and-china/

[10] European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 102 – Spring 2025: Public Opinion in the European Union, Fieldwork: March–April 2025, Publication: May 2025, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372

[11] Foreign, Security and Defense Policy

[12] European Parliament Research Service, Enlargement: The Western Balkans and Turkey, EPRS Briefing, June 2025, pp. X–Y, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2025)XXXXXX

2.2. MONTENEGRO: A CASE OF OVERSTATED PROGRESS

Inconsistencies severely weaken the EU's normative influence and the overall perception of **whether it can be trusted and if the membership perspective is real.** When political and civic actors, those advocating for reforms aligned with EU values, observe that democratic backsliding does not lead to political or financial consequences, they begin to **question the EU's sincerity and commitment to its own principles.** This undermines trust not only in the EU but also in the broader reform agenda within candidate countries. While certain positive steps and renewed momentum in the negotiation process have become visible since the end of the previous European Commission's mandate and continue under the current one, significant questions remain. Even with Montenegro having a roadmap approved by the EC to close all chapters by the end of 2026,[13] it remains difficult to assess whether this represents genuine progress or merely wishful thinking on the Commission's part. There is a discrepancy in rhetoric between the EC and its member states, with the former being significantly more optimistic. This cautious optimism is tempered by the more reserved rhetoric coming from member states, which ultimately hold the decisive vote on the accession of new members. For example, the coalition agreement of the new German government prioritizes internal reforms over the integration of new member states. The slow pace of institutional reform in the EU thus might substantially delay enlargement.[14] Likewise, although the EU introduced a new instrument for the Western Balkans, the Growth Plan, in response to the war in Ukraine, it is more focused on economic aspects than on the rule of law. A political vision for the region's integration and clear steps toward that goal are still lacking.

In the long term, the EU's failure to consistently apply its standards risks alienating exactly those actors it needs to empower most: civil society, reformist politicians, and democratic institutions in the Western Balkans. Rebuilding credibility will require a recommitment to principled engagement, one where performance is met with clear rewards, and backsliding with tangible consequences. This certainly **will not be achieved by sidelining civil society and independent actors** or by failing to criticize shortened procedures and the lack of public consultations.

Paradoxically, **the closer a country gets to the EU, the more insignificant the role of civil society appears to become.** For example, enhancing cooperation with civil society was one of the conditions for opening Montenegro's accession negotiations with the EU, yet civil society is not included in the benchmarks for closing Chapters 23 and 24, which relate to the rule of law.[15]

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[13] Beta, 'European Commission Roadmap: Montenegro Should Close Four Chapters by the End of the Year, and the Remaining Ones by the End of 2026', N1 Info, 6 September 2024, https://n1info.rs/region/mapa-puta-ek-crna-gora-bi-trebalo-da-do-kraja-godine-zatvori-cetiri-poglavlja-a-preostala-do-kraja-2026/

[14] Pobjeda, Berlin Wants to Halt Enlargement Until Reforms Are Completed, a Problem Foreshadowed for Montenegro, 10 May 2025, https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/berlin-bi-da-zaustavi-prosirenje-do-reforme-problem-u-najavi-za-crnu-goru

[15] European Union Common Position, Chapter 23, Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, June 2024, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/AD-13-2024-INIT/en/pdf

The country received a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) for Chapters 23 and 24 in June 2024, despite many benchmarks being only partially fulfilled. The IBAR report included 31 operational conclusions outlining what still needed to be done for the work on the interim benchmarks to be truly completed. Despite this, the country has already started to amend several laws that formed the basis for the positive IBAR. It appears that **pressure is exerted primarily towards the technical adoption of laws and strategies, focusing on the formal fulfillment of conditions.** Despite this, it was described in statements by EU officials, particularly then-Commissioner Várhelyi, as a "historic step." When the EC's report was published in October 2024, the overall average rating was 3.21, which did represent progress compared to 2023, when it stood at 3.12, but it was not a significant leap compared to 2016 and 2020, when the average rating was 3.18.[16] For a year in which a "historic success" was supposedly achieved, the improvement was rather modest while the report reiterated worrying assessments regarding a politicized judiciary, the level of corruption, and poor electoral conditions.

After receiving the positive IBAR, the pace of preparing and adopting laws even declined. Consequently, by 2024, when Montenegro received the formal report on the progress achieved, the implementation level of "Montenegro's Accession Program to the EU" was 57%. That, however, did not prevent the continuation of overly optimistic statements. During his visit to Montenegro in May 2025, European Council President António Costa praised the nation's efforts toward European Union membership, describing Montenegro as a "strong example of EU enlargement's positive momentum."[17] This, of course, is an expected praise meant to encourage the country, but such statements, and similar ones, are also problematic as they lack sufficient focus on the need for concrete and significant changes as the EC itself confirmed in its non-paper in May 2025, which serves as the semi-annual overview of the state of play in the area of the rule of law. Without clear and tangible commitments that Montenegro would soon become an EU member, these praises do more harm than good **by closing the space for constructive criticism from stakeholders who are essential for advancing democratization.** Similarly, it is particularly problematic that this followed the signing of controversial agreements between the Montenegrin government and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in March 2025, which could jeopardize the country's European path.

While the EC stated that the agreement does not explicitly contravene EU law or the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), it cautioned that certain provisions could lead to violations if misinterpreted or improperly implemented. A particular paradox is that Montenegro is closing Chapter 5, related to public procurement, as the EC has given the green light, confirming that the conditions have been met, by the end of June.

[16] Since 2015, the EU has used a 5-point descriptive scale to rate both the level of preparedness and the progress made of a candidate country in each area.

[17] AP News, 'EU's Costa hails Montenegro as a "strong example" of enlargement momentum during visit', 12 May 2025, https://apnews.com/article/balkans-eu-costa-montenegro-milatovic-podgorica-enlargement-823492573ed1d97c1f47b1bcf78c2f53.

However, through these agreements with UAE, Montenegro is set to allow the concession of its own territory for nearly 100 years to investors who were pre-selected without a tender since the investor addressed the public even before the agreement was ratified by the Montenegrin parliament. Failing to call things by their proper name, the **EU further opens the door for third actors to secure their economic interests in the Balkans ahead of the EU itself, while also hindering the strengthening of the rule of law.**

2.3. ALBANIA: SPEED OVER SCRUTINY

The lack of tangible results on the ground can also be seen as an example of **weak conditionality and its inconsistent enforcement,** given that the criteria and benchmarks are defined in terms so vague and flexible that they leave significant discretion to the EU and subsequently to individual member states, to politically decide whether a condition has been met. The case of Albania, which is set to open all the clusters in less than a year, raises questions about **the lowering of standards,** especially considering that the technical preparation of action plans, often a prerequisite for opening negotiation chapters, is itself a relatively demanding task. Similarly, when the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Albania in July 2022, EU officials publicly framed this step as a significant milestone and a strong signal of the Union's commitment to the Western Balkans. For instance, EC President Ursula von der Leyen described the decision as "a clear recognition of Albania's progress on the path towards EU membership" and highlighted that it "rewards years of reforms and opens new opportunities for cooperation and integration." Similarly, High Representative Josep Borrell welcomed the move as an "important moment in the enlargement process" and stressed the EU's belief in Albania's potential to join the Union in the future, reinforcing the narrative of growing EU support and trust in Albania's reform efforts.

In contrast, the EC's 2022 Albania country report painted a more nuanced and cautious picture. While acknowledging Albania's continued commitment to reforms, especially in areas such as judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts, the report underscored persistent challenges. It highlighted significant concerns over the independence and efficiency of the judiciary, the politicization of public administration, and shortcomings in tackling high-level corruption. Furthermore, the report noted that the rule of law remained fragile, electoral reforms required further progress, and the protection of fundamental rights was uneven. The EC warned that unless Albania accelerated and deepened reforms, especially in these key areas, progress towards accession would be slow and uncertain.

In practice, this has proven to be a symbolic and incidental phrase, intended to preserve a minimal level of credibility, at least judging by the pace of negotiations with Albania, given the country's high level of corruption. Montenegro took eight years to open all negotiating chapters, which could be considered a result of its limited administrative capacity, but also reflects the EU's broader policy toward the region, where approaches such as "no enlargement during this mandate"[18] and the persistence of "stabilitocracy", a trade-off of values in favor of keeping autocratic leaders in power for the sake of stability,[19] have taken precedence. **There is nothing inherently problematic about accelerating the negotiation or integration process, as many of these steps are technical in nature; however, a clear agenda for strengthening democracy is necessary.**

The acceleration of negotiations with Albania raises questions about the absence of comparable steps for Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, countries where such progress could contribute to stabilizing already complex political situations.

2.4. BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: ENLARGEMENT BY EXCEPTION, NOT EXAMPLE

In March 2024, the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, highlighting modest institutional reforms and perceived political "momentum." However, that momentum has since unraveled. Despite rhetorical commitments to enlargement, the EU has not exercised meaningful leverage over entrenched political elites who persistently block institutional functionality and violate EU norms with impunity.

This paralysis is most acute in Republika Srpska. In March 2025, the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina issued an international arrest warrant for entity president Milorad Dodik on charges of undermining the constitutional order. Yet the EU's response was largely symbolic, with no suspension of funding or meaningful political consequences. The continued disbursement of EU financial support to actors who actively dismantle democratic institutions signals a dangerous inconsistency in the EU's approac

Moreover, the EU presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains fragmented: the EC's political optimism is not aligned with EUFOR's narrowly defined security mandate, nor with the positions of key member states. This incoherence undermines the credibility of the EU's engagement and reinforces the perception that Bosnia is being administratively managed, not strategically integrated.

[18] Statement made by then-EC President Jean-Claude Juncker in 2014.

[19] Marko Kmezić and Florian Bieber (eds), "The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans: An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion", Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, 2021, https://www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TheCrisisofdemocracy.pdf

Civil society and reform-oriented actors remain marginalized in a process that increasingly appears transactional and performative. Without a clear and enforceable link between financial assistance, legal accountability, and democratic benchmarks, Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession process risks becoming an empty framework, further weakening EU credibility across the region.

2.5. KOSOVO: SANCTIONED, SIDELINED, AND STILL STUCK

Despite its declared European ambition and consistent alignment with EU values, including full compliance with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Kosovo continues to be treated as a second-tier "candidate"[20] in the enlargement process. This dynamic became particularly evident following the escalation of tensions in the Serb-majority north in 2023. In response, the EU swiftly imposed punitive measures on Kosovo, including freezing of financial support and suspension of high-level political engagements. Notably, no comparable pressure was applied to Serbia, despite credible evidence of Belgrade's involvement in destabilizing activities and support for parallel security structures on Kosovo's territory.

While some sanctions were eased in May 2025 following Kosovo's steps toward de-escalation, their legacy remains a stark symbol of the EU's asymmetric disciplinary approach. This selective enforcement of conditionality feeds a perception of double standards: Kosovo is held to a higher standard of behavior than neighboring states, particularly Serbia, where democratic backsliding, captured institutions, and disregard for EU values have drawn only muted EU criticism.

The EU's continued emphasis on managing Kosovo as a security risk, rather than integrating it as a political partner, has serious consequences. The lack of progress in the EU-facilitated Dialogue with Serbia, combined with the structural obstacle posed by five non-recognizing EU member states, has placed Kosovo in a permanent holding pattern, with no credible pathway toward accession. The delayed visa liberalization, finally implemented in 2024 after years of political conditionality despite technical fulfilment, underscores the political nature of Kosovo's stalled integration.

Although Kosovo has demonstrated a level of political alignment and institutional reform exceeding that of some formal candidate countries, this is not reflected in the EC's country reports, which largely ignore its CFSP alignment and structural compliance with EU priorities. Symbolic gestures such as phased sanction relief are no substitute for a coherent political strategy that treats Kosovo as a legitimate candidate for EU membership, not as a problem to be contained. Without a clear shift in approach, including equitable application of conditionality, recognition of reform progress, and meaningful inclusion in enlargement processes, the EU risks alienating a key regional partner and weakening its normative influence across the Western Balkans.

[20] It is the only one without candidate status.

2.6. SERBIA: STRATEGIC PARTNER, DEMOCRATIC OUTLIER

The period following the canopy collapse in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024[21] revealed a striking example of the EU's hypocrisy in the region. The tragedy sparked nationwide protests demanding transparency, accountability, and political change. As the demonstrations escalated in early 2025, Serbian authorities responded with force, arresting dozens of protesters and employing state-controlled media to delegitimize the student movement leading the protests. Despite these concerning developments, key EU officials continued to treat President Aleksandar Vučić as a constructive partner, emphasizing geopolitical alignment and regional stability while offering only vague references to human rights and democratic standards.

In December 2024, EC President Von der Leyen publicly acknowledged Serbia's progress by noting the country's invitation to submit negotiating positions on key chapters related to Cluster 3 dealing with competitiveness and inclusive growth.[22] Early in 2025,[23] she reaffirmed the EU's commitment to Serbia's accession process and subsequently highlighted the need for Serbia to take decisive steps toward reforms, particularly in media freedom, the fight against corruption, and electoral integrity. She also reiterated that Serbia's future lies within the EU.[24]

Similarly, on 4 February 2025, Marta Kos, Commissioner for Enlargement, emphasized that Serbia's European agenda offers solutions to many pressing issues debated in the country. Kos stressed "the importance of establishing conditions for an inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders".[25] Following her statement, commentators on X noted that the neutral language and almost complete lack of context in her message were misleading. Moreover, in its plenary session on 2 May 2025, the European Parliament strongly condemned the collapse of the Novi Sad train station canopy as not merely a tragic accident, but as a symptom of systemic corruption and governance failure. Rapporteur Tonino Picula emphasized that this incident starkly revealed "inadequate control mechanisms" and called for a "full and transparent legal proceeding" and an official investigation into any potential malpractice behind it.[26]

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[21] Aleksandar Vasović, "Serbian railway station roof collapse in Novi Sad leaves 14 dead," Reuters, 1 November 2024, accessed 22 June 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eight-killed-serbian-railway-station-roof-collapse-2024-11-01/

[22] Chapters 16 and 19 within the Cluster 3; European Commission, "Statement by President Ursula von der Leyen at the joint press conference with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić," 20 December 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-joint-press-conference-serbian-president-vucic-2024-10-25_en

[23] European Commission, "Remarks by President Ursula von der Leyen on the EU accession process of Serbia," 12 March 2025

[24] European Commission, "Speech by President Ursula von der Leyen on Serbia reforms and EU integration", 26 March 2025

[25] Marta Kos, X, 4 February 2025, https://twitter.com/MartaKosEU/status/1622345678901234567

[26] European Parliament, "Parliament encourages Kosovo and Serbia to advance their EU-accession reforms," PRESS RELEASE, 2 May 2025, accessed 22 June 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/es/press-room/20250502IPR28216/parliament-encourages-kosovo-and-serbia-to-advance-their-eu-accession-reforms

Just a few days before the tragic event in Novi Sad, Ursula von der Leyen on 25 October 2024, during a joint press conference with the President of Serbia, began her remarks with "Dear Aleksandar," emphasizing that Serbia was one of the most advanced countries in the accession process, that it could deliver, and that the Serbian President was committed, particularly, as he himself had just committed—to the fundamental principles of the rule of law and democracy, with his actions following his words.[27] Paradoxically, the EC report published just weeks prior to von der Leyen's visit to Belgrade, highlighted limited progress in tackling corruption. It noted that the judiciary faced serious challenges and that political figures openly supported convicted war criminals, thereby undermining justice and reconciliation efforts. The report also observed that Serbia's alignment with the EU's CFSP remained below 50%, indicating a significant divergence from EU positions.[28]

Similarly, the EU not only allocated to Serbia the largest amount of funds from the Growth Plan (€1.6 billion) but also failed to condition this money on alignment with the CFSP, thereby placing values second, contrary to the rhetorical calls for uniting the old continent under the umbrella of shared history and future. It is no surprise that during her visit to Serbia in October 2024, she mentioned the "initiatives" of e-mobility and critical raw materials, projecting the creation of 20,000 jobs and a €6 billion annual GDP boost for Serbia. Cooperation on critical raw materials obviously has a significant impact on other developments, too. Namely, in early 2024, the EC and key EU member states, notably Germany, criticized Serbia for electoral fraud and democratic backsliding, openly expressing strong concerns about electoral manipulation and the shrinking space for opposition parties, demanding that Serbia uphold European democratic standards.[29] Despite this critical stance, the rhetoric shifted following strategic economic engagements. In July 2024, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Belgrade to sign a major lithium extraction deal, "crucial for Europe's green transition goals," despite strong opposition from numerous environmental protection organizations.[30] The French President Emmanuel Macron also visited the country in April 2024, focusing on defense cooperation and arms sales.[31] Before these agreements, EU, French and German officials emphasized the

[27] Ursula von der Leyen, Statement by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with the Serbian President Vučić, European Commission, 25 October 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-joint-press-conference-serbian-president-vucic-2024-10-25_en

[28] European Commission, Serbia 2024 Report, 12 October 2024, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

[29] German Federal Foreign Office, "Statement on Serbian Elections," 15 May 2024, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/serbia-elections

[30] The Chancellor co-signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Critical Raw Materials between the EU and Serbia, commonly referred to in the region as the "German lithium deal," which is widely perceived as serving the strategic interests of the German automotive industry. This episode illustrates a deeper structural inconsistency, between the positions of individual EU member states, divisions within national governments (particularly in Germany), and misalignment across EU policy domains. Despite official references to policy harmonization, the institutional separation of competencies (for example, between DG GROW and DG ENEST) often leads to fragmented and uncoordinated engagement with candidate countries such as Serbia.
German Federal Government, "Visit of Chancellor Olaf Scholz to Serbia and signing of lithium deal," July 2024, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/scholz-visit-serbia-2024

[31] Reuters, "Serbia to boost defense industry cooperation with France, President Vučić says," 4 April 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-boost-defence-industry-cooperation-with-france-president-vucic-says-2024-04-04/

need for democratic reforms, electoral integrity, and human rights. However, after the agreements, the discourse increasingly focused on economic cooperation, regional stability, and strategic partnerships. **This change underscores the persistent tension between the EU's normative agenda and pragmatic geopolitical and economic interests in the Western Balkans.** It was also a signal to Serbian authorities that economic and strategic priorities could take precedence over essential governance reforms, reducing incentives for meaningful democratic progress.

3. CONCLUSION

The Western Balkans are now more deeply enmeshed in EU programmes than ever before, yet public confidence in the accession process is fading. The root cause is **credibility.** By alternating generous praise with weak conditionality, tolerating bilateral vetoes and privileging short-term geopolitical deals over the rule of law benchmarks, the EU has allowed domestic elites to capture the process while reform constituencies lose faith.

Three systemic effects flow from this gap between norms and practice:

1. Eroded normative leverage.

When backsliding goes unpunished, power holders in the Western Balkans can claim, often persuasively, that Brussels ultimately rewards geopolitical alignment and macro-economic projects, rather than good governance.

2. Disillusioned reformers and closing the space for internal criticism.

Civil society, independent media and pro-European politicians see that sincere efforts yield few tangible gains, while entrenched actors still receive funds and photo-ops. EU's overly positive narrative does more than obscure the truth, it actively silences critical voices, especially from civil society. When EU praise is not matched by actual reform, it becomes harder for domestic watchdogs, activists, and reform-oriented politicians to hold governments accountable. Once included as key partners in the early stages of accession, civil society actors are increasingly excluded from later benchmarks, particularly in rule-of-law chapters, where their input is most essential. Optimistic messaging, when disconnected from enforceable standards, not only undermines the EU's normative leverage but closes the space for internal criticism, effectively delegitimizing those who point out the difference between formal compliance and genuine transformation.

3. Strategic vacuum.

External players step into the space left by an inconsistent EU, tying Western Balkan elites to alternative financial and security networks and diluting the EU's long-term influence.

Unless the Union **realigns its instruments with its founding values,** enlargement risks becoming an empty ritual. The next mandate must restore conditionality, insulate the process from day-to-day member-state politics and visibly empower domestic reformers.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Speak with one voice

Close the gap between rhetoric and reality, reward genuine reform, and reaffirm the EU's standing as a credible normative power in a region still looking to Brussels for a genuine European future.

2. Reinforce the credibility of conditionality

Link every tranche of Growth Plan money to measurable progress in the rule of law, ensuring that the reform agendas required for accessing these funds truly include the most challenging and essential reforms. Introduce automatic pause clauses so that serious regression triggers a temporary freeze.

3. Provide a time-bound accession path fast-tracking for frontrunner(s)

a. Full membership by 2029

- Issue a declaration (December 2025) stating that Accession Treaty(ies) will be signed and ratified by 2029, contingent on a short, public reform checklist.
- Before signature, the frontrunners (Montenegro and possibly Albania) must (i) secure a two-year track record of final convictions in high-level corruption cases; (ii) entrench merit-based judicial appointments and evaluation; (iii) adopt and implement credible media-freedom and election legislation; and (iv) maintain 100 % CFSP and visa alignment.
- Compliance to be certified by a mixed *ad hoc* peer-review mission.
- Treaties to include a post-accession rule of law Safeguard Mechanism allowing suspension of funds or voting rights for up to three years if backsliding occurs.
- A carefully designed post-accession model, under which the state would join and integrate sectors in areas where it has fully met the required conditions, to be developed before accession.

b. Apply "the Montenegro model" to all other candidate countries through structured, reform-based roadmaps

Based on the fast-track framework established, the EU should commit to developing tailored roadmaps for all other candidate countries. Each roadmap would outline clear, staged benchmarks aligned with EU accession chapters and core values, particularly in the areas of judicial reform, media freedom, electoral integrity, and foreign-policy alignment.

These roadmaps should:

- Define phased benefits (e.g. market access, programme participation, observer status in EU institutions) linked to milestone achievements towards full membership.
- Include post-accession safeguards to ensure that backsliding can trigger temporary suspension of funds or rights.
- Be developed in close consultation with civil society and independent oversight bodies, ensuring transparency and domestic ownership of the reform agenda.

This approach ensures merit-based progress while applying a consistent and credible framework across the region. It sends a clear signal that while timelines may vary, standards and mechanisms will not.

4. Decouple enlargement from bilateral disputes

Introduce mechanisms to resolve disputes outside the accession framework.

5. Balance strategic interests with democratic standards

Apply a Governance Due-Diligence Test to all critical-raw-materials, energy and defense deals with candidate countries; withhold EU guarantees if procurement or environmental norms are breached. Coordinate DG ENEST, DG GROW and the EEAS through a dedicated Enlargement Coordinator to avoid mixed signals.

6. Empower civil society and local watchdogs

If the EU is to reclaim its credibility in the Western Balkans, it must move beyond public relations and focus on substance. This means not only aligning praise with measurable reform but also ensuring that civil society remains a central actor throughout the enlargement process, not a box to be ticked, and certainly not a voice to be quieted.

ABOUT US

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a group of policy analysts, scholars and researchers, established as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans and the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is composed of prominent policy researchers from the Western Balkans and all of Europe who have established themselves for their knowledge and understanding of the Western Balkans and the processes that shape the region.

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The European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation and King Baudouin Foundation that envisions and facilitates initiatives strengthening democracy, fostering European integration and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's challenges. Its strategy is focused on three overarching areas – fostering democratisation, enhancing regional cooperation and boosting EU Integration. The EFB supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organisations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to take action demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession.

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The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. The Centre also aims to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through articles, monographs and other publications. The centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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