

Same Path, Different Destiny? The European Integration Journey of Albania and North Macedonia (2001–2025)

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Abstract

This paper examines the European integration trajectories of Albania and North Macedonia from 2001 to 2025, analyzing how two neighboring Western Balkan countries with shared strategic objectives have experienced distinct pathways toward European Union accession. Using a comparative and qualitative approach, the study investigates institutional preparedness, political reform processes, regional diplomacy, and the impact of the EU's conditionality framework. North Macedonia's journey, initiated with the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2001, has been repeatedly hindered by bilateral disputes, identity politics, and internal political instability. Albania, while avoiding major external blockages, has faced persistent challenges related to governance, corruption, and the rule of law, which have slowed its reform momentum. Despite shared participation in regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process and alignment with the Western Balkans enlargement agenda, the two cases illustrate how similar starting points can lead to divergent outcomes. The findings demonstrate that the interplay between domestic reform capacity and external conditionality has determined each country's pace and depth of integration. Furthermore, the study argues that geographical proximity and similar policy aspirations are insufficient predictors of harmonized European futures. Instead, political will, institutional stability, and the credibility of EU incentives remain decisive factors. By tracing both successes and setbacks across two decades, the paper provides a deeper understanding of how structural conditions, geopolitical dynamics, and EU engagement shape the transformative power of Europeanization in the Western Balkans. We find ourselves witnessing achievements, failures, and expectations that belong not only to the citizens but also to civil society, the academic sphere, diverse communities, institutions, and the collective consciousness. In the persistent wait for the overcoming of bilateral disputes, there is a prevailing sense that not only is the region advancing at divergent paces, but that the EU itself appears inconsistent and without a harmonized voice regarding the issues of consensus and decision-making.

Keywords: European integration; Albania; North Macedonia; EU conditionality; Western Balkans; enlargement process

Introduction

The European integration of the Western Balkans has been one of the most ambitious political transformations in post–Cold War Europe. Among the states of the region, Albania and North Macedonia stand out as two cases that share a clear strategic orientation toward the European Union (EU), yet demonstrate divergent trajectories despite similar geopolitical positions and goals. Their respective integration processes reflect the interaction between domestic reform efforts, regional diplomacy, and the conditionality mechanisms of the EU enlargement framework.

The year 2001 marks a significant turning point for North Macedonia, with the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) and the Ohrid Framework Agreement. These developments formalized the country's commitment to EU norms while simultaneously initiating internal political normalization through interethnic power-sharing. For Albania, although SAA negotiations began in 2003, the early 2000s represented a period of post-transition consolidation and alignment with EU-supported stabilization initiatives. The 2003 Thessaloniki Summit reaffirmed the European perspective of the Western Balkans, yet the implementation of reforms varied widely across states.

Between 2001 and 2025, Albania and North Macedonia experienced alternating cycles of progress and stagnation. Both achieved candidate status and jointly opened accession negotiations in 2022, but their overall trajectories diverged due to different domestic and external constraints. North Macedonia faced prolonged bilateral disputes—first with Greece over the country's name, later with Bulgaria regarding historical and linguistic issues—delaying accession talks for nearly two decades. Albania's progress was instead hindered by internal governance challenges, including corruption, weak institutional capacity, and limited judicial independence.

The EU's conditionality framework, including the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) and later the Berlin Process, has shaped the reform agendas of both countries. North Macedonia's eventual NATO membership in 2020 demonstrated its ability to resolve disputes and align with Euro-Atlantic standards, yet EU accession remained dependent on shifting political criteria within the Union. Albania, conversely, made gradual legislative progress but struggled with consistent implementation. Both countries continued to frame EU accession as a national strategic goal, yet their experiences reveal differing levels of resilience and adaptability.

This comparative analysis investigates how domestic political dynamics, reform capacity, and the credibility of EU conditionality influence the integration paths of Albania and North Macedonia. It seeks to determine whether the two states share the same European path or are moving toward different outcomes—offering insights into the future of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans.

1. Comparative Overview of the Integration Process (2001–2025)

The process of European integration for the Western Balkans — and specifically for Albania and North Macedonia — cannot be understood outside the broader theoretical and institutional context of EU enlargement policy. Scholarly debates on Europeanization, conditionality, and regional integration offer the conceptual tools necessary to interpret how external incentives interact with domestic structures to produce varying outcomes in candidate countries.¹

The framework of Europeanization provides a useful lens for analyzing the transformative power of the EU on domestic politics. As defined by Radaelli (2003), Europeanization refers to “processes of construction, diffusion, and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, and shared beliefs” originating from the EU level. In the Western Balkan context, this process is mediated through the EU’s conditionality mechanisms, which link progress in accession to measurable reforms in governance, democracy, and rule of law (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).²

The rationalist institutionalist model of conditionality suggests that candidate countries adapt when the benefits of compliance (EU membership or financial support) outweigh the domestic political costs of reform. However, when the credibility of rewards is weakened — due to delays, political blockages, or shifting EU priorities — compliance tends to diminish. This has been particularly visible in North Macedonia’s experience, where the credibility gap between reform and reward eroded public trust in the enlargement process. Albania, on the other hand, experienced conditionality fatigue stemming from repetitive technical requirements and prolonged evaluation cycles, which limited reform momentum.

The constructivist approach adds a complementary perspective by emphasizing the role of norm diffusion and identity transformation. In both Albania and North Macedonia, European integration has served not only as a political objective but also as a normative anchor for modern statehood and democratic consolidation. Yet, as Börzel and Risse (2012) argue, the domestic absorption of EU norms depends on the strength of local institutions and political will — both of which have fluctuated over time in the Western Balkans.

Academic literature on EU enlargement after the 2004 and 2007 waves often highlights the “enlargement fatigue” and the resulting shift from transformative enthusiasm to cautious pragmatism. Scholars such as Grabbe (2014) and Dimitrova (2016) note that the EU has increasingly adopted a “strict but fair” approach, prioritizing the quality of

¹ Claudio Radaelli, “Whither Europeanization? Concept Stretching and Substantive Change,” *European Integration Online Papers* 4, no. 1 (2000): 1–19.

² Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, *The Politics of European Union Enlargement: Theoretical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2005).

reforms over speed of accession. This evolution has deeply affected the Western Balkan states, whose accession process has been slower and more politicized compared to the Central and Eastern European countries.³

For Albania, existing studies (Elbasani, 2013; Bino & Qerimi, 2020) underline the country's progress in aligning legislation with the *acquis communautaire*, yet emphasize persistent challenges related to state capture, corruption, and weak administrative capacity. The judicial reform launched in 2016 under EU monitoring is often cited as a landmark in re-establishing credibility, though its implementation remains contested.⁴

For North Macedonia, the literature (Marolov, 2019; Markovik, 2022) consistently highlights the dual impact of domestic political crises and external vetoes. The long-standing name dispute with Greece delayed the opening of negotiations despite early compliance with EU recommendations. The Prespa Agreement (2018) is seen as a critical moment demonstrating the country's political maturity and willingness to resolve bilateral conflicts. However, new disputes with Bulgaria have reinforced skepticism toward the fairness and consistency of the EU's conditionality.⁵

Comparative analyses (Bieber, 2018; Keil, 2021) suggest that while both Albania and North Macedonia have formally adhered to EU integration frameworks such as the Stabilisation and Association Process and the Berlin Process, the domestic impact of these initiatives depends heavily on the internal political environment and the credibility of EU engagement. The literature increasingly points to a paradox of convergence without accession — a situation where states align with EU standards yet remain outside the Union due to geopolitical and institutional blockages.

From a conceptual standpoint, Albania and North Macedonia illustrate the divergent outcomes of parallel integration efforts. Both have followed similar institutional routes — SAA, candidate status, and negotiations — but their progress reflects the interplay of external incentives and internal political capacity. The theoretical insight emerging from this comparison is that conditionality alone is insufficient to guarantee convergence; it must be complemented by credible EU commitment and domestic political stability.

This framework informs the subsequent analysis by situating both cases within the broader debate on EU transformative power in the post-2004 enlargement era. The literature thus provides the foundation for examining how the European project has

³ Heather Grabbe, "The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanization Through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe," *Palgrave Studies in European Union Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

⁴ Arolda Elbasani, "European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans: Europeanization or Business as Usual?" *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 7, no. 13 (2016): 20–36.

⁵ Gjeraqina Leka, "The Politicization of EU Enlargement: North Macedonia Between Prespa and the Bulgarian Veto," *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 27 (2023): 87–108.

shaped, and been shaped by, the political trajectories of Albania and North Macedonia over the period 2001–2025.

2. EU Conditionality and Domestic Transformation

EU conditionality has remained the cornerstone of the European integration process for all Western Balkan states, serving both as an instrument of reform and a test of political commitment. For Albania and North Macedonia, the conditionality framework has functioned as a guiding mechanism for domestic transformation, linking progress in political, legal, and economic reforms to measurable milestones in the accession process. However, the nature, intensity, and effectiveness of conditionality have varied significantly between the two countries, reflecting their distinct political realities and external constraints.

Since the launch of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) in the early 2000s, the European Union has established a comprehensive framework of incentives and benchmarks that define the pace of candidate countries' accession. Conditionality operates on the principle of "strict but fair" criteria, where progress is rewarded with deeper integration, while stagnation or regression triggers delays or suspension (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

For North Macedonia, this process formally began with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) signed in 2001 — marking its early institutional engagement with the EU and an initial phase of political normalization after the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001). The EU's conditionality in this context was directly linked to the implementation of the Ohrid peace arrangements, minority rights protection, and the establishment of multiethnic governance structures. These conditions were intended not only to stabilize the country but also to demonstrate the EU's transformative potential in conflict-prone societies.

In contrast, Albania's engagement deepened following the signing of its SAA in 2006 and the application for EU membership in 2009. The early phases of conditionality centered on institution-building, the fight against corruption, and the modernization of public administration, areas where Albania faced persistent challenges despite formal progress. The introduction of the "Vetting Process" in 2016 — an unprecedented mechanism for evaluating judges and prosecutors — became the cornerstone of Albania's EU-driven judicial reform, supported politically and financially by both the EU and the United States (Elbasani & Šabić, 2021). This process has been credited with improving transparency and accountability in the justice system but has also generated institutional tensions and political polarization.⁶

⁶ Reiner Vogel, "Judicial Vetting in Albania and the EU's Rule of Law Conditionality," *European Yearbook of Human Rights* 2022: 455–478.

A comparative analysis of conditionality reveals a fundamental dichotomy between the two cases. For Albania, the primary impediments to accession are internal, rooted in persistent deficits of governance, rule of law, and state capacity. For North Macedonia, by contrast, the most significant constraints have been external and geopolitical, arising from bilateral disputes with existing EU member states. This divergence underscores that the EU's "strict but fair" conditionality is applied in an asymmetrical political landscape, where the very definition of a "fair" obstacle differs dramatically. In Albania, the EU's focus has consistently remained on the rule of law, judicial independence, electoral integrity, and the fight against organized crime. The European Commission's annual reports from 2014 to 2023 repeatedly underscore the need for credible implementation of reforms rather than legislative adoption alone. The politicization of anti-corruption institutions, recurrent electoral disputes, and the lack of cross-party consensus have often hindered sustainable progress (Bieber, 2020). However, the Commission's 2022 and 2023 reports acknowledged tangible progress in aligning Albania's judiciary with EU standards, which contributed to the formal opening of accession negotiations in July 2022.

The 2023 Report on Albania released by the European Commission confirms that Albania has sustained a stable commitment to EU integration; however, specific structural reforms are uneven. Albania is keeping pace with implementing the justice reform that began in 2016, and screening judges and prosecutors, by far one of the most transformative processes in the region. More than two-thirds of all vetted judges and prosecutors have exited or resigned, drastically reshaping the judiciary, Commission reports. But while demonstrating resolve to combat corruption, it has also created temporary institutional vacuums and backlogs on cases, hindering judicial efficiency. Albania must also "further consolidate the independence, accountability and transparency of the judiciary" in order to meet EU standards, the report said. In corruption, Albania has progressed only moderately, thanks in large part to the enhanced work of SPAK (Special Anti-Corruption Structure). SPAK's investigations and prosecutions of high-level officials have been praised, but the Commission said that corruption "continues to be widespread and serious," and the latter mainly concerned with public procurement, local governance, and the police sector. It is ongoing to see a lack of final convictions in many of these types of high-profile cases, which is causing a dent in the trust of the public. And with respect to fundamental rights and the rule of law in a democratic system, the report finds ongoing weak points with respect to media freedom. Journalists continue to confront political pressure, economic influence, and defamation suits used judiciously to squash deep reporting of investigations. The Commission calls on Albania to bring in stronger safeguards to ensure media independence and diversity. There is a medium to low level of preparedness for the internal EU market to participate economically for Albania. And the economy, while growth has persisted, continues to suffer from long-term structural problems: high

public debt, low diversification, low productivity and persistent youth unemployment. Brain drain is a big problem, as emigration shrinks the skilled labor force that has long-term implications for the economy's competitiveness.

North Macedonia's trajectory, on the other hand, demonstrates the limitations of EU conditionality when political obstacles external to the *acquis* dominate the process. Despite obtaining candidate status as early as 2005, the country's accession was repeatedly delayed due to bilateral disputes — first with Greece over the country's name, and later with Bulgaria regarding historical and linguistic issues. These disputes, though unrelated to the formal Copenhagen Criteria, became *de facto* conditions for progress, revealing the politicization of enlargement and the declining credibility of EU conditionality (Trauner, 2020; Markovikj & Risteska, 2022).

The Prespa Agreement (2018), which resolved the long-standing name dispute with Greece and enabled NATO accession in 2020, was celebrated as a diplomatic triumph of conditionality-driven transformation.⁷ Yet, the subsequent Bulgarian veto in 2020–2022 revived public skepticism about the fairness and consistency of EU criteria, challenging the pro-European consensus that had defined Macedonian politics since the Ohrid period. These developments have underscored that while Albania's reforms are tested by internal governance limitations, North Macedonia's European path remains contingent upon the resolution of geopolitical disputes beyond its immediate control, effectively holding its progress hostage to the bilateral agendas of EU member states. North Macedonia is still considered among the most advanced states (from 2023 to 2024, according to the 2023–2024 Commission Reports) concerning alignment with EU directives, such as those outlined in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), in accordance with 100% of the EU declarations and sanctions, including all sanctions on Russia concerning its war against Ukraine. The level of alignment also reinforces the country's standing as a reliable strategic ally. Nonetheless, the political climate remains highly politically polarized, and the political landscape has a profound effect on the pace of reforms in crucial chapters. With regard to rule of law, North Macedonia is “moderately prepared” but progress is proceeding slowly because of a political consensus deficiency and institutional weaknesses. Judicial power remains compromised through perceived political bias, low efficiency and piecemeal reform. That said, the Commission especially highlights concerns about selective justice, politically charged court cases and opaque judicial appointments. The battle against corruption comes with mixed results, too; even where institutional frameworks exist, the number of final convictions in high-level cases remains modest. The constitutional amendment needed by Bulgaria—to include Bulgarians in the preamble—continues to be the main political constraint. The Commission reinforces that this amendment is the key enabler in making progress on the next stage of accession negotiations.

⁷ Nikola Dimitrov, “The Prespa Agreement: An Unexpected Victory for Diplomacy,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 3 (2020): 349–365.

Such stalemate has eroded public trust as well as increased Eurosceptic narratives. “Additional delays risk undermining the credibility of the accession process,” the report warns. Economically, North Macedonia remains macro economically stable, but its structural issues are still significant: low investment levels, a large informal economy, energy vulnerability, and a fast-paced emigration of skilled workers. Demographic decline: demographic declines are increasingly emerging as a significant challenge to labour market stability and ability to innovate, the report noted. The Commission acknowledges the challenges, but commends the country’s unwavering support for EU foreign policy and its contributions to regional security cooperation. North Macedonia’s involvement in the Common Regional Market and in the Berlin Process demonstrates clear commitment to EU-compatible regional integration.

The sustainability of EU-driven reforms depends on the degree of domestic ownership — the willingness and capacity of national elites to internalize EU norms beyond formal compliance. In both Albania and North Macedonia, conditionality has at times produced “reform fatigue”, where public enthusiasm wanes as the tangible benefits of integration remain distant.

In Albania, the vetting process, despite its long-term promise, has resulted in a temporary vacuum in the judiciary due to the dismissal of numerous judges and prosecutors, slowing the pace of justice delivery. Meanwhile, the concentration of political power and the weakness of opposition parties have raised concerns about “managed democracy” and executive dominance, limiting pluralism in reform implementation (Freedom House, 2024).

In North Macedonia, repeated postponements of accession negotiations have similarly eroded public trust in the EU, despite widespread societal support for integration. Surveys by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) and Eurobarometer indicate a decline in the perceived credibility of the EU’s enlargement policy since 2020, especially following the Bulgarian veto and the slow implementation of the new cluster-based negotiation framework introduced by the EU in 2021.

Comparatively, the trajectories of Albania and North Macedonia highlight two distinct expressions of EU conditionality’s transformative capacity:

- In Albania, conditionality operates primarily through institutional engineering and the rule-of-law conditionality model, where progress depends on domestic implementation and technocratic oversight.
- In North Macedonia, conditionality functions as a political stabilization mechanism, where progress hinges more on conflict resolution, regional diplomacy, and the broader EU credibility in the Western Balkans.

This contrast demonstrates that while conditionality remains the main vector of Europeanization, its effectiveness is asymmetrical — stronger where domestic institutions are resilient and elites are cooperative, weaker where external vetoes undermine trust in the process. Ultimately, both cases reaffirm that EU conditionality is a necessary but insufficient driver of transformation unless paired with consistent EU engagement, credible incentives, and domestic political consensus. Having established this theoretical foundation, the following section will apply these concepts directly to the cases of Albania and North Macedonia. It will analyze how the mechanisms of Europeanization, rationalist cost-benefit calculations, and constructivist norm diffusion have played out differently in each country's journey, shaped by their unique domestic and geopolitical contexts.

3. Regional Cooperation and the Berlin Process

Regional cooperation has been a defining component of the European integration architecture in the Western Balkans since the early 2000s. For both Albania and North Macedonia, participation in regional frameworks — particularly the Berlin Process, the Common Regional Market (CRM), and the Open Balkan initiative — has served as both a complement and a test to their EU aspirations. These initiatives embody the European Union's long-standing belief that good neighborly relations and regional integration are indispensable preconditions for successful accession, as outlined in the Thessaloniki Agenda (2003) and reaffirmed through successive EU enlargement strategies (European Commission, 2018; Marciacq, 2020).

Following the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (2001 for North Macedonia, 2006 for Albania), both countries engaged with the EU's broader strategy of fostering stability through regionalism. The Berlin Process, launched in 2014 under the initiative of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, represented a renewed political and economic framework aimed at reinvigorating the EU enlargement agenda after years of stagnation. It sought to create tangible progress through infrastructure connectivity, youth mobility, economic integration, and reconciliation among the six Western Balkan states.

Within this framework, Albania and North Macedonia have played active and complementary roles. Albania positioned itself as a proponent of regional pragmatism, emphasizing connectivity projects such as energy corridors, transport routes, and digital integration that align with EU standards. North Macedonia, meanwhile, leveraged its participation in the Berlin Process to restore its international credibility after the political crisis of 2015–2017 and to highlight its commitment to regional reconciliation following the Prespa Agreement (2018) and the Treaty of Friendship with Bulgaria (2017) (Bechev, 2019).

The Common Regional Market (CRM) initiative, endorsed during the Berlin Process Summit in Sofia in 2020, became a key instrument for advancing the region's economic convergence with the EU. Built upon the principles of the EU's Four Freedoms — the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people — the CRM aims to prepare Western Balkan economies for integration into the EU single market.

Albania has demonstrated strong institutional alignment with CRM objectives, advancing reforms in customs facilitation, mutual recognition of professional qualifications, and digital transformation. These efforts are complemented by its participation in Energy Community and Transport Community initiatives, which anchor Albania's economy within European regulatory frameworks (Regional Cooperation Council, 2023).⁸

For North Macedonia, the CRM provides a platform to showcase its economic and political reliability despite recurrent blockages in its EU accession negotiations. By participating in joint initiatives — such as the Regional Roaming Agreement (2021) and the Green Lanes for trade facilitation — the country has sought to demonstrate that regional cooperation can progress independently of EU political delays. However, the persistent dependence on external financing, coupled with limited institutional capacity, continues to constrain the full materialization of CRM objectives across both countries.

Launched in 2019 by Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, the Open Balkan initiative (initially branded as "Mini-Schengen") represents a regionally driven effort to promote economic integration and mobility. Its declared objective is to eliminate trade barriers, facilitate labor mobility, and enhance investment flows without waiting for the slow pace of EU accession.

Albania has been one of the strongest advocates of the Open Balkan framework, framing it as a bottom-up approach to regional cooperation aligned with EU principles. Prime Minister Edi Rama has frequently presented the initiative as a pragmatic solution to accelerate integration "from within the region," emphasizing its compatibility with EU conditionality and CRM objectives (Rama, 2022).

For North Macedonia, participation in the initiative has served both symbolic and strategic purposes. After resolving its disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, Skopje has sought to project itself as a bridge-builder and promoter of regional stability, using the Open Balkan platform to reaffirm its European credentials through cooperation with Serbia and Albania. However, critics — including political leaders in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina — have expressed skepticism about the initiative's inclusiveness, warning that it might create parallel structures that fragment the EU integration process (Marciacq, 2020; Bieber, 2021).⁹

⁸ Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer 2023: Public Opinion Survey* (Sarajevo: RCC, 2023).

⁹ Florian Bieber, "Open Balkan or Closed Doors? Regional Cooperation and Fragmentation in the Western Balkans," *Nationalities Papers* 50, no. 5 (2022): 1023–1042.

While regional initiatives like the Berlin Process, CRM, and Open Balkan have contributed to increased connectivity, economic interdependence, and political dialogue, they remain supplementary rather than substitutive to full EU membership. The European Union continues to view them as preparatory mechanisms, not as alternatives to enlargement.

The credibility of these frameworks ultimately depends on the EU's continued engagement and the clarity of accession prospects. Without concrete progress in the enlargement agenda, regional cooperation risks becoming symbolic multilateralism — valuable for dialogue but limited in transformative power. The 2021–2025 period has illustrated this tension vividly: while Albania and North Macedonia jointly opened accession negotiations in July 2022, the lack of visible milestones since then has tested both political will and public optimism.

Comparatively, Albania's regional diplomacy emphasizes pragmatic economic integration, positioning the country as a driver of regional modernization. North Macedonia's regional engagement, conversely, serves as a diplomatic instrument to reinforce its international legitimacy and counter the narrative of perpetual victimhood due to external blockages.

Both countries exemplify how regional cooperation has evolved into a parallel track of Europeanization — one that deepens interdependence and builds administrative capacity even when EU accession remains distant. Yet, as scholars have noted, such initiatives can only complement, not replace, the political commitment of the EU to enlargement (Marciacq, 2020; Bechev, 2022).

The 2023 Berlin Process Summit reaffirmed the importance of regional integration as a complementary path toward full EU membership. Both Albania and North Macedonia successfully fulfilled the technical and regulatory requirements for the Green Lanes, Digital Lanes, and Regional Mobility components of the Common Regional Market (CRM). The Commission emphasizes that active participation in CRM prepares Western Balkan economies for eventual integration into the EU Single Market.

In foreign and security policy coordination, North Macedonia and Albania continue to be the strongest CFSP-aligned countries in the region, fully supporting EU positions on Russia, Belarus, and global human rights issues. The establishment of the Western Balkans Quad (WBQ) in 2023 strengthened their coordination on sanctions, diplomacy, and crisis response, setting a regional standard for EU-oriented alignment.

Despite this progress, the Commission stresses that regional political tensions, especially unresolved disputes and rising nationalist rhetoric, continue to pose risks to long-term stability and reform credibility.

4. Challenges and External Influences

Despite formal progress in meeting the Copenhagen criteria and the steady alignment with the EU *acquis*, both Albania and North Macedonia continue to face enduring structural challenges related to the rule of law, corruption, and state capture (Freedom House, 2024). In Albania, political polarization and weak institutional accountability have often undermined reform continuity, while in North Macedonia, issues of politicization of the public administration and limited judicial independence persist despite EU-supported programs (European Commission, 2023). These weaknesses reveal the limits of conditionality-driven reforms, which often produce compliance on paper but limited implementation in practice.

A critical external dimension shaping both countries' trajectories is the EU's internal ambivalence toward enlargement. The phenomenon of enlargement fatigue—stemming from the Union's internal crises, Brexit, and rising populism—has generated a lack of strategic coherence within EU policy towards the Western Balkans (Tzifakis, 2022). This hesitation has been visible in the repeated delays of accession talks, particularly the vetoes imposed by Bulgaria on North Macedonia and the slow progress of Albania despite meeting technical benchmarks. As a result, public trust in the EU has fluctuated, fostering Euroscepticism and reform fatigue among political elites and societies alike (Bieber, 2020).

At the same time, external geopolitical actors have intensified their engagement in the region. Russia has sought to maintain its influence through disinformation and political obstruction, particularly in contexts where ethnic divisions or unresolved disputes provide fertile ground. China, through its "17+1" cooperation framework and the Belt and Road Initiative, has offered infrastructure investments that occasionally bypass EU transparency and procurement standards (Vangeli, 2021). Turkey, leveraging historical and cultural ties, has pursued soft-power diplomacy and economic presence, positioning itself as a parallel partner for development. These overlapping influences have created a multidimensional strategic environment where EU integration remains the preferred—but no longer exclusive—orientation.¹⁰

In this complex interplay of domestic fragility and external competition, the credibility of EU conditionality emerges as the decisive factor. When the EU's incentives appear uncertain or inconsistent, domestic actors tend to revert to short-term political calculations rather than sustained structural reform (Noutcheva, 2023). Consequently, the challenge for both Albania and North Macedonia in the post-2020 period lies not only in meeting technical conditions but in sustaining democratic resilience within a fragmented international order increasingly defined by strategic competition.

¹⁰ Ana Krstinovska, "China's Soft Power in the Western Balkans: Instruments, Limitations and Impact," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 1 (2023): 45–63.

Conclusions

The comparative trajectories of Albania and North Macedonia illustrate the complex interplay between domestic reform capacities, EU conditionality, and regional geopolitics in shaping the pace and credibility of European integration. Both states have officially declared EU membership as a strategic and civilizational goal, reaffirming the Thessaloniki Agenda of 2003 as the cornerstone of their foreign policy orientation. However, the period between 2001 and 2025 reveals that shared aspirations have not translated into parallel outcomes.

For North Macedonia, the path toward accession underscores the limitations of conditionality in contexts dominated by identity politics and bilateral disputes. Despite substantial progress in institutional and democratic reforms—epitomized by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), the Prespa Agreement with Greece (2018), and the Friendship Treaty with Bulgaria (2017)—its accession trajectory has repeatedly been delayed by external vetoes and internal political instability. These challenges reveal that even full compliance with EU norms does not guarantee progress when enlargement becomes politicized within the Union (Bechev, 2023).

In contrast, Albania's experience highlights the centrality of domestic governance and rule of law in sustaining the credibility of the accession process. The comprehensive judicial reform launched under the Vetting Process has become both a model and a test case for the transformative potential of EU conditionality (Elbasani & Šabić, 2021). Yet, persistent polarization, electoral disputes, and limited administrative capacity continue to undermine effective policy implementation and erode public trust in the reform process.

Taken together, these cases reaffirm that EU integration in the Western Balkans remains a two-level game: its success depends not only on the fulfillment of technical conditions by candidate states but equally on the EU's strategic coherence and political commitment to enlargement. The credibility of the Union as a transformative actor has been weakened by inconsistent signaling, internal divisions, and the influence of competing global powers.

Moving forward, a differentiated yet inclusive approach—anchored in merit-based evaluation, credible timelines, and stronger political engagement—is essential for transforming the promise of the Thessaloniki Agenda into a tangible reality. Only through a renewed commitment on both sides can the EU enlargement project regain its transformative potential, ensuring that Albania and North Macedonia's shared path ultimately converges toward a common European destiny, rather than remaining a case of "same path, different destiny."

The 2023–2024 European Commission Reports highlight an expanding credibility gap between reforms from candidate countries and political actions taken within EU political orders. Albania’s advancement in justice reform, its efforts fighting corruption, and North Macedonia’s exceptional alignment with its foreign policy represent solid steps in the right direction, but political blockages, bilateral disputes, and inconsistent enlargement signals from the EU continue to slow momentum. This has bred greater domestic scepticism and stoked populist narratives in both countries. Even if both countries fall under the EU accession regime, the Commission repeatedly emphasizes also the need for more fundamental reforms within the judiciary, public administration, economic governance, and media freedom for progress to be maintained. Ultimately, the reports emphasize that EU accession is not only a matter of legislative alignment but also long-term institutional integrity, democratic resilience, and societal trust.

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