UDK 339.924(4-672EU:497.17)
https://doi.org/10.18485/fpn_saborp.2025.18.ch4

Natalija Shikova*

International Balkan University
North Macedonia

Change of the Political Setup: Will the New Political Actors Push Forward or Set Back the EU Integration of North Macedonia?

ABSTRACT

North Macedonia's process of EU integration has proven to be long, difficult, and extremely complex. There have been many setbacks along the way, some of which are still ongoing. The process itself is currently without a certain outcome, mainly affected by political considerations rather than its substance. Different government structures have made the process closer to or further from the EU, although all political agendas have supported the country's EU integration. Despite the strict conditionality and fulfilling conditions not closely related to the process itself, EU integration has reached a stalemate for reasons that can, among others, be traced to EU functions and capacities. The

* Associate Professor at the International Balkan University – Faculty of Law. Contact email: n.shikova@ibu.edu.mk

only winning card of the previous government was getting closer to the EU, but the previous steps undertaken without general public approval caused its tremendous failure and increased EU skepticism. Currently, the right-wing and nationalistic government has its stake, promising to keep the EU future in sight but not at the expense of national identity. Previous experiences point to EU inconsistency, unclear stances, and a lack of coherent policies toward the country, which have raised nationalistic sentiments, caused a slide back in democracy, affected the impartial functioning of institutions, and led to a deterioration of human rights. Whether the new government will be capable of establishing a reasonable compromise with external factors, securing its multiethnic coalition in power, reversing what has been done, and securing a more credible EU integration process is a significant promise, the results of which remain to be seen in the coming years.

KEYWORDS: elections, North Macedonia, EU integration, challenges

INTRODUCTION

Considering North Macedonia, the process of EU integration proves to be long, difficult, extremely complex, with many setbacks and currently without a certain outcome. During the years it was mainly affected and led by political considerations, rather than the essence of the processes, and the main energy was focused on political issues, rather than on satisfying conditions, and fulfilling objective criteria that should move the country closer to the European Union (EU). Arguably the current outcome is a result of from one side the incoherent EU policies and on the other hand, the incapacity of the country to deliver the outcomes related mainly to the rule of law issues, stability of the institutions, professionalization in the public administration and aptitude in management of various institutional reforms that should eventually move the country closer to the EU. After resolving the name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement (2018), Macedonian citizens hoped their country's EU integration process would advance. The constitutional name change was a significant and painful decision, fueling expectations that accession negotiations would soon follow. However, the EU failed to initiate talks in June and October 2019, primarily due to opposition from France and the Netherlands. These countries criticized shortcomings in democratic reforms and the fight against corruption, expressing skepticism about expanding the Union during a time of internal challenges, including Brexit. This hesitation reflected broader "enlargement fatigue", a recurring pattern since 2005 when similar resistance emerged after the rejection of the EU constitution (Runcheva Tasev 2020). This resulted in enacting a new enlargement methodology that

predicts even stricter conditionality, gradual approach, and reversibility during the negotiation process. After the "No" to accession negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania in October 2019 and following the French Non-paper in November 2019, on 5 February 2020 the European Commission released a Communication to the EP, the Council, the ECSC, and the Committee of the Regions with a proposal for "Enhancing the accession process – a realistic EU viewpoint for the Western Balkans" that supposed to push the EU accession process forward. The process should become more reliable but at the same time more fluid with an enhanced stronger political steering line. As a result, the new enlargement methodology was agreed by the EU member states. In line with the Copenhagen and Madrid criteria, this was the fourth time that the EU has officially adopted new rules in accession negotiations, starting since 1998.

After that impediment, and more than a decade of receiving positive recommendations from the European Commission to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia, the Council finally initiated them in March 2020. But that was not the last stone on the road toward the EU. Apart from the previous difficulties, the next one was Bulgaria's veto that blocked the start of North Macedonia's negotiations with the EU from March 2020 until June 2022 when the Intergovernmental Conference on accession negotiations with North Macedonia – held within the French presidency of the EU Council, facilitated a breakthrough in North Macedonia's EU accession process by offering a proposal to resolve the dispute that had hindered the country EU integration progress for two years. This effort, termed a "French proposal", led to the adoption of a revised negotiation framework, which received approval from all EU member states, including Bulgaria, and North Macedonia (Kaytchev 2023).

EU enlargements are based on the Copenhagen criteria, stipulating that the European Union is open to any European country that fulfills the democratic, political, and economic criteria for membership (Copenhagen Criteria 1993). The political criteria assume stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and protection of minorities. The economic criteria suppose a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces; as well as the administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the *Acquis* and ability to take on the obligations of membership. At the core of the EU enlargement process are the policies of conditionality, which applied vaguely undermines the consistency and coherence of EU policies. That certainly affects the public trust in the processes, or during these difficult times, the Macedonian authorities had to sustain interest in the country's European prospects despite receiving few encouraging signs that integration would occur within a reasonable timeframe (Runcheva Tasev 2020). Unfortunately, the last pools are suggesting that this support continues to decrease among Macedonian citizens being a result of the inefficiency of EU enlargement policies from one side and from another the incompetence of the country officials to carry the essential reforms

mainly related to the efficiency of the judiciary and implementation of the anticorruption policies.

This paper focuses on the North Macedonia EU accession process in its challenges. It outlines the credibility of the process itself, but at the same time the lack of sustainable reforms that could potentially foster the expected outcome. Although the EU seems to be a "moving target" for North Macedonia, after the national elections in 2004, there is a change in the domestic political actors that are proclaiming that the reforms will intensify but the EU integration will not be at the expense of national identity. The paper is trying to address the capabilities of the new political actors, within the political climate in the country and in the EU in general, to foster the EU Integration for North Macedonia, carry the undertook reforms and at the same time keep the promises for a more dignified negotiation process. The analysis draws on the selected, credible sources that are directly related to the topic. It is based on the literature review of the legal and political documents, national and regional reports related to EU enlargement, as well as an examination of the secondary sources that include academic articles, policy analyses, and reports from reputable NGOs and Think Thanks dealing with the questions of interest. The descriptive study, encounters limitations since secondary data analysis depends on the quality of reports and potential biases related to this diverse socio-political context.

EU AS A GOAL

The Republic of North Macedonia (at that time the Republic of Macedonia) became an independent state in 1991, with the dissolution of the Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The country was among the first ones (alongside Slovenia) to fulfill the criteria to be recognized as an independent state. Those criteria were set by the Arbitration Commission for Yugoslavia (Banter Commission) (Declaration on Yugoslavia 1991) and were accessed by it, i.e. the Banter Commission was deciding will the country could gain international recognition by fulfilling the standards (Guidelines 1991). The Republic of Macedonia met the set standards but failed to gain international recognition (Shikova 2023, 262). Despite the legal terminology, the process itself was led by the political considerations that predominated (Rich 1993). Apart from fulfilling the conditions, the country failed to reach international recognition because at that time so-called *name issue* that had with neighboring Greece. Being a "tar-baby of the Balkans", no state involved itself arguably fearing that it will get stuck in the existing problem, i.e. the other states would have regret if they intervened, and if they didn't. International law is far from ideal, and the country needed to adapt to the new situation and make all the difficult compromises (Maleski 2022, 40). As a result, the Republic of Macedonia

changed its Constitution (1991) declaring that do not have territorial pretension over its neighbors and gained recognition. However, it was accepted in the UN by the provisional reference – Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. During that time the country set its priority and strategic goals to become a member of NATO and in that time part of the European Communities.

Following the set priorities many instruments for support were signed between the Republic of Macedonia and the EU, and one of the most important was the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) (2001) (again being the first countries from former SFRY that signed this instrument). SAA should have supported trade liberalization, financial assistance, and new contractual relations, an extensive part of which relate to internal market issues. As a political instrument provided a framework for political dialogue for support of political relations between the parties (signatories), it promoted harmonious economic relations and gradually developed a free trade area between the EU and the Republic of Macedonia. The SAA was the most important preferential agreement for the Republic of Macedonia, which helped in moving the barriers to the entry of Macedonian agricultural products, and its preferential nature can be understood concerning the volume of trade between the Republic of Macedonia and the EU. The signed SSA helped more than 50% of the foreign trade of the Republic of Macedonia to be realized with the countries from the European Union, making the EU the biggest trading partner for the country. That led to trade increment and opening of the market, (Chavkoska, Shikova, Dacev 2018). Since the remarkable progress, in 2005 the country became an EU candidate country for membership, and in 2009 gained a visa liberalization. Following that, the European Commission issued first recommendations for opening the accessing negotiations. The decision was not supported by the European Council. As a result, the country faced vetoes due to the name issue from neighboring Greece, an argument that despite the international mediation proved too difficult to be resolved. Hence, in time the name issue has developed into a multidimensional dispute between the Republic of Macedonian and Greece, through which a whole series of "controversial" political, semantic, cultural, ethnic, ecclesiological, and historical issues emerged and were highlighted (Ljorovski Vamvakovski, Tasev & Stojanovski 2019). Until 2015 there were 6 recommendations for opening negotiations without any success.

EU CONDITIONALITY

Democracy promotion is a set of actions of non-domestic actors aimed to support domestic actors that share the same objectives to overcome an authoritarian power or to guarantee the rule of law. Before the 1990s, democracy, and democratization were listed below on the EU agenda. With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the birth of new states in Central and Eastern Europe, democracy

regained new value in the European jargon, and the Copenhagen criteria (1993) set democratic governance and human rights as preconditions for EU membership. Following the initial success, the EU scholars asserted the EU's Enlargement policy as the most successful tool of its Foreign Policy, and the EU conditionality as a significant factor in the democratization processes. Despite the initial success and enthusiasm for the EU's normative power (Manners 2002), a decade later, it was registered an evident democratic backsliding in particular in the Western Balkans (Wunsch 2019). Among the reasons for regression, the ones that are critiquing the policy of conditionality are listing the inconsistency and credibility of the EU policy that created double standards in its process of democracy promotion.

The EU policy of conditionality was not performing well, and in line with staled accession because they faced vetos, different sentiments raised in (at that time) the Republic of Macedonia. The complex issues resulted in democratic backsliding, a captured state, and the institutions and evidenced violation of human rights. Instead of going ahead, the country went far back in the process. There can be various reasons for that but among others are the inconstant EU policies. There are obvious indicators of double standards existing between the EU's vision of 'democracy' set in the EU founding treaties, established accession benchmarks, and EU actions that were neither coherent nor consistent. Several scholarships are indicating clear dissociation between gradual improvements in reaching formal compliance of the EU candidate countries with the EU membership criteria and stagnating, even declining democratic performance. Even more, the examples point out that formal progress towards membership and high-level interactions with EU and the member state officials are legitimizing the corrupt elites and contributing towards state capture (Richter 2012; Richter & Wunsch 2019; Kmezić & Bieber 2017). The democracy promotion and democratization in Western Balkan countries, based on conditionality, showed defects. Among the reasons for such a negative outcome was the fact that the EU through its Enlargement policy was trying at the same time to achieve major democratization of the countries but also to achieve a major security for itself. Such policy in the case of Western Balkan countries, diminished the consistency and credibility of the EU as a normative or transformative power and created double standards in its policy of democracy promotion (Richter 2012).

As a result, on a more substantive level, there was a clash between EU actions for democracy promotion and EU democratic values. There was a dichotomy between the EU's vision of 'democracy' set in the EU founding treaties, established accession benchmarks, and EU actions towards Western Balkan countries. In some of the cases, the compliance was more the result of the EU's strategic leverage than of voluntary submission to the EU's normative power and is vulnerable to reversals in the short run (Noutcheva 2007).

In this setting, North Macedonia entered into a political crisis that in many aspects questioned the functioning of the state's legal system and its

democratic credentials and brought to the table questions regarding the legitimacy, legality, and effectiveness of the state's democratic processes.

UNTIDYING THE KNOT (?!)

Following the political crisis that paralyzed the whole political system in 2016, after the elections and political consolidation, a new agreement with the political elites was signed, and in 2018 the country got another recommendation for opening EU negotiations. That was political leverage since it became clear that without a change of the constitutional name, despite all of the reform processes and related conditionality, an EU perspective remains far away. In opposition to the popular will expressed in a consultative referendum (only 31% were for a change) and with a democratic defect of the instigated methods, the country's constitutional name was changed – into the Republic of North Macedonia, based on the Prespa Agreement that the government signed with Greece in 2018. Although seen as a political success the Agreement was extensively disapproved. The main criticism was related to the lack of the competencies of the signatories and its problematic ratification. It challenged the constitutional norms and the rule of law principles since it was signed before the change of the Constitution – legally such an act should follow not to be beforehand the change of the major legal act of the country. It was against the popular will, or it was ignoring political realities and popular sensibility. Those practices were seen as acts against the sovereignty of the weaker state. There was obvious bargaining of the EU actors with the national elites and at the same time turning a blind eye to the apparently undemocratic methods i.e. they seem to be acceptable as long as they are pro-EU (Chryssogelos 2019). Apart from the opposition and from the general public, the Agreement was criticized as well by the academic community since it was considered to intervene in ethnic and national identity issues and has negative implications over both (Vankovska 2019); it has legal flaws and creates constitutional violations (Siljanovska Davkova 2018) and it is an obvious indicator of EU double standards in consideration of its foreign policy (Nikodinovska – Krstevska 2018).

Nevertheless, technically, the Prespa Agreement overcame the name differences and pushed the process further. Though not for long. The initial enthusiasm was again confronted with a new obstacle, namely the quest of several EU member states (France and the Netherlands) for changes to the enlargement methodology towards a more credible process in 2020. After the changed Methodology the European Council endorsed the decision to open accession negotiations and the Presentation of the draft negotiating framework to the Member States (Enlargement Package 2024). In 2022 Intergovernmental Conference on Accession Negotiations was held, and in December 2023 the screening ended. Now North Macedonia is in a negotiation process but none of the chapters are opened and in fact, the negotiations have not started yet.

This again is conditioned by the political issues, coming now from another neighbor that now questions the Macedonian language, being used in the EU official documents, and unresolved differences over the historical questions tackling national identity (Mirel 2022). The conditions are set now as a part of another proposal (a French one), accepted by the previous Government (now in the opposition) and opposed by the opposition and the general public. The proposal was introducing a possible constitutional change that would legitimize a Bulgarian minority in the country. Additionally, the historical issues among both countries have to be overcome, and that can be done with full implementation of the agreement between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. The agreement named Treaty on Friendship and Good Neighbourly Relations and Cooperation was signed in 2017 and sets a Commission that should deal with the historical narratives (Kaytchev 2023).

Considering the circumstances, and change of the political forces in North Macedonia, where the conservative and more nationalistic party gained the elections (VMRO) in 2024, we can observe that the regional and international pressure is again consistent, the veto threats are again present, coming from Bulgaria, but as well from Greece for arguably not respecting the previously signed Prespa Agreement. Therefore, the EU path seems even more uncertain and the challenges are ongoing without a final outcome at stake. In fact, the Prespa Agreement caused a huge problem in its implementation, especially in changing the citizen's documents encompassing the new name of the country. As explained above, the political process surrounding the Prespa Agreement raised significant concerns about its constitutional legitimacy, adherence to rule-of-law principles, and its acceptance opposite to the popular will (Chryssogelos 2019). Similar issues are related to the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbored Relations, and Cooperation with the Republic of Bulgaria (2018), which has elements that tackle the national history and historical figures that basically are stuck in its implementation as a lack of cooperation from both sides. Additionally, Bulgaria requested to enter the Bulgarians in the Constitutions as an ultimatum to start the negotiation process with the EU and accept the negotiation framework although the fact that the Macedonian minority is completely denied in Bulgaria and the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) are not respected as well as other Council of Europe recommendations related to the implementation of the Framework Convention for Protection of the National Minorities (1994) (Ivanov 1998). On 16 July 2022, the Macedonian Parliament approved the proposal to advance EU accession negotiations, but the decision revealed deep political divisions. Out of 120 deputies, only 68 voted in favor, while others abstained or walked out in protest during the vote. Despite the optimism of the political elites that the process towards the EU will move after "17 years in the waiting room", the reality presented an existing skepticism, immense opposition from the general public, and non-acceptance by the many political figures in the country. This resistance reflected a broader sentiment among Macedonians, as evidenced

by widespread street protests in the capital Skopje that coincided with visits from European leaders, including European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council member Charles Michel. The constitutional changes were not accepted, and the public saw them as an external pressure and interference in domestic affairs, so last year North Macedonia faced another veto.

NEW ELECTIONS PROSPECTS

The previous ruling majority didn't acquire support to introduce changes in the Constitution related to including the Bulgarian minority in the major legal act, and the uncertainty remains despite the new parliamentary and presidential elections and the establishment of the new government. Nevertheless, the subject of eventual constitutional amendments is now part of another political geometry. Considering the political circumstances and general public sentiments, it is expected that the European path will remain stalled for at least a year. Apart from political considerations, the general support of EU processes started to decline. For example, in 2020 – 74% of the population supported the EU integration. According to the analysts, despite the renewed deadlock in North Macedonia's EU accession process, at the beginning, the public support for EU membership has remained relatively stable. In 2021, 68% of the population expressed support for joining the EU, while the percentage of openly Eurosceptic respondents declined significantly. However, support levels revealed an interethnic divide between the two largest ethnic communities in the country that underscores differing perceptions and priorities regarding European integration within North Macedonia's diverse population. The support for EU membership among ethnic Albanians, was notably high (82%) in comparison to the ethnic Macedonians, whereas the level of support was lower but still substantial (63%) (Damjanovski 2022). This gap still exists, but currently, according to the last analysis (2023), only 60% of the country's population supports EU membership which is the lowest percentage ever since the EU perspective was discussed in the country. According to the recent report of the Institute for Democracy, more than 1/3 of the population doesn't see progress in the accession process. The majority of those who support North Macedonia's EU membership base their preference on the anticipation of future economic benefits, expectations for improvement of the standard of living in the sense of economic development, the reduction of unemployment, the quality of life, and the improvement of infrastructure. Those elements are seen as key public policy areas that could be positively affected by the EU membership (Damjanovski 2023). On the other hand, identity and value-based factors remain the most dominant predictors of Euroscepticism. Grievances over the change of the constitutional name of

the country, cultural threats over national identity, and loss of sovereignty are pinpointed as important motivations for the respondents' decision not to support Macedonian membership in the EU. In general, we can say that there is no less support for the EU, but less belief that the processes are credible, with fair and certain outcomes (Damjanovski 2023).

The elections in 2024 brought a new political reality and a new government. The new coalition government already established its program where the EU perspectives and international relations activities are very generally set. The government activities aimed to be focused on full compliance of the national policy with EU common foreign security and defense policy; intensification of the cooperation between the Macedonian and EU institutions; improving the capacities for EU integration; promotion of cooperation with regional organization, initiatives, and procedures; continuation of participation in all regional initiatives; strengthening the economic diplomacy and development of the national strategy for cooperation with diaspora (Responsible Government 2023). According to the political authorities, the government will not withdraw from EU membership, but it will not do anything contrary to national interests and strategic determinations of citizens. Apparently, new politics that will be introduced will be less submissive compared to the previous one. The main tendency of the Government is to continue the path towards European integration. Therefore, the focus will remain on the EU, but the main work will be done domestically, determined on internal reforms, but without acceptance of further humiliations and concessions for eventual EU membership (Nova Makedonija 2023), or in this case – starting with the EU negotiation. Considering this, the EU stays on the Government agenda but will act towards promoting and protecting national pride/ identity. It will ensure compliance with the EU policies and cooperation with EU institutions and at the same time will strengthen diplomatic efforts.

After the decupling with Albania in September 2024, since the EU gave the green light to start the accession talks with Albania in October 2024, and separate it from North Macedonia, which began previously in the same package, there are fears that this decision can deepen frustration and alienation in North Macedonia, especially as Bulgaria's demands continue to block progress. This is a significant shift from the joint approach established in 2022, which tied Albania's progress to North Macedonia's unresolved issues with Bulgaria (Jakov Marusic 2024). On the other hand, there is fear that this stalemate has the potential to affect the interethnic relations with the country and affect the functioning of the multiethnic coalition government. However, in the 100-day Government, there is a significant shift, a move from strong national rhetorics and more intensive diplomatic activities towards finding a solution that "can be acceptable" for the electorate i.e. the constitutional changes with the delayed effects, guaranties that will be no more vetos; focus on more sustainable reforms, etc. (Otcet 2024).

EU ENLARGEMENT QUESTIONED

The questions discussed above are happening in a very uncertain future related to EU enlargement policy in general. It is without doubt that enlargement is not always high on the EU agenda. Different crises prove that have the potential to influence the process, the narratives, and the outcomes, however, it proved as well that proposed solutions are often short-sided, not well strategically thought, solutions that are made to extinguish a fire, and not much sustainable in the longer run. For example, the migrant crisis in 2015 returned the Western Balkans to the political map of Europe, underscoring the strategic importance of the region for the stability and security of the EU. However, the short focus on the Western Balkans did not develop long-term solutions on how to stabilize the countries in the region and ensure their sustainable democratic transformation and economic development. Additionally, the recent developments on the European continent brought the process in another direction. Unfortunately, the war has returned to European soil, and the ongoing wars and crises in the World caused some major changes and more uncertain outcomes. Now EU is more aware of the fact that enlarging is a strategic interest as a way of structuring the continent around EU values and standards. Granting candidate countries status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 is the strongest indicator of significant changes in the EU's enlargement policy. In that sense, EU considers that a credible enlargement policy is a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, security, and economic growth in the whole of the region. However, the question is willing EU favor its geopolitical interest over the enlargement conditionality poses (Franco-German Working Group 2023). It is a questionable if EU will hold the promise to strengthen its role as a geopolitical actor in its Eastern neighborhood, enabling it to promote European values by protecting democratic processes Since the values are in the center if EU fundamental identity, it is important to understand if the Union will prioritize its geopolitical interests, even at the potential expense of its core values? (Ognjanoska 2022; Akhvlediani 2022).

Besides fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria that suppose democratically elected government, stability of the institutions, the existence of democracy, rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities are set as necessary standards. EU conditionality is at the heart of EU enlargement and guarantees rewards upon fulfilling the prescribed requirements of which membership is the utmost. On the other hand, the credibility of the process depends not only on strict conditionality rules but also on consistency or utilization of the same standards (Ognjanoska 2022). Hence, in the Western Balkan countries, the EU strengthened its conditionality policy requiring more tangible results in the rule of law areas. Recently several changes were introduced to the enlargement methodology. However, only one country from the region managed to join the EU so far – Croatia in 2013. That was the last enlargement of the EU. The reasons for such stalemate are complex and puzzling. Mainly they are related

to the lack of cohesion inside the Union about further expansion, enlargement fatigue and decreased citizens' support, and systematic lack of reforms on the side of candidate countries. Hence, the often-forgotten fourth Copenhagen criterion is very relevant in terms of the Western Balkans. However, in addition to the Copenhagen criteria (European Council, 1993), the EU is requesting the Western Balkans to also address all the bilateral disputes within the accession process, before joining the EU. Along with the adverse public opinion and divided attitudes inside the Union regarding further enlargement, unresolved bilateral disputes in the Balkans, arguably provided a cover for the EU to keep the doors closed. Moreover, this situation caused a dangerous trend of *bilateralisation* of the process instead of Europeanisation as its final goal. EU Enlargement policy towards Western Balkans is characterized by not only strengthened conditionality but also lost or at least decreased credibility (Ognjanoska 2022).

Evidently, despite arguably the goodwill, the processes in essence have some defects, and the applied EU policies do not give the expected result. Consequently, the Western Balkan countries are stuck in a hybrid status quo on their way to democracy (Richter & Wunsch 2019) and the EU is in a clinch between security interests, based on prospects for rapid integration, and the need for democratization, facing the conflict of its objectives (Richter 2012). In this political game, the Balkan elites are invoking the "stability" card as their "shortcut" towards accession, whereas the high-level EU officials (who are favoring stability) are turning a "blind eye" to fundamental reforms (Abazi & Ivanovska 2016). Despite the defects – the countries are formally progressing towards EU membership, and in most cases, the EU remains silent on those happenings, until they are confronted with concrete evidence, such as in the case of wiretapping in Macedonia (Kmezić & Bieber 2017). Following these negative outcomes, recently, the debates have shifted towards the quality of democracy in new and prospective members.

To prove this claim with some facts about North Macedonia's reality we can take into account the World democratic index (Democracy Index 2023) which indicates a general flaw of democracy for North Macedonia, being on 72 places out of 165 states and two territories with average grade 6.03 (bellow 6 is for the hybrid or authoritarian regime). The Index in 2022 was pointing 6.10 and this democratic sliding can be attributed to law political culture, improper functioning of the institutions, and flaws with respect to the rule of law – being in the same time the major remarks from the EU Commission expressed in the country progress report towards EU (EU Progress Report 2024).

TOWARDS THE FUTURE – EU AS A MOVING TARGET

The EU's cautious stance stems from lessons learned during previous enlargements, where admitting underprepared member states resulted in significant challenges. However, this risk-averse approach could cause the

EU to overlook its transformative potential in fostering reforms in candidate countries. The Western Balkans face pressing issues such as corruption, organized crime, rule of law deficiencies, and weak democratic processes. A failure to engage robustly with these societies' risks losing critical momentum for change. While the region struggles with systemic problems, the EU possesses practical expertise to guide reform and mitigate corruption's root causes, such as inequality and low trust. Active and sustained EU engagement is essential to harness its transformative power, ensure progress, and strengthen its influence in the Western Balkans (Runcheva Tasev 2020). In this general frame, there is a possibility for the EU internal reforms but as well an uncertain future to EU enlargement policy. The initiatives are towards establishing the EU Political community, and options for staged accession. However, to maintain the credibility of the processes, perhaps the best option is to settle the political issues outside the EU (especially in consideration of the bilateral disputes). There shouldn't be a dichotomy between the visions and EU-promoted standards and inconsistency among declarations and actions.

There are a few suggestions about the future of the European integration process – both on the inside and on the outside. The most circulated one stands for staged accession and making Europe a Union of states placed in concentric circles. The main question is whether the EU can reconcile the two principles hard to cohabit: "geopolitical interest" while preserving the "value of the EU conditionality". Given the nature of the European unification project and the position of the EU as a global actor, it must not abandon the rule of law in the enlargement policy because it would mean losing the very identity and main objective of the process (Franco-German Working Group 2023). The European Union's plan to implement the necessary internal reforms and thus be practically ready for the reception of new member states by 2030 is at stake. But the real question is whether this will happen and whether there is a mood among the smaller member states to give up the right of veto and other privileges to contribute to the "big picture", i.e. reforming the Union?! However, introducing reform requires unanimous decisions that are difficult to reach. We all secretly know the answer, and it is negative, although those of our politicians who are self-declared pro-EU claim the opposite, probably driven by narrow party reasons and a lack of other arguments and concrete results in their work. Namely, many of the smaller states fear that they will always be outvoted, and there is a great fear that France and Germany will get an even more dominant role than they have now (Ivkovic 2023).

On the other hand, a complete decomposition of the Union can be as well an outcome, i.e. a Union in several "circles", consisting of a narrow circle of the most powerful member states, followed by another circle of members who benefit from the EU's internal market and the third last, an outer circle based on the European Political Community (Mihajlovic et al. 2023) promoted by French President Emmanuel Macron last year. A community where, apart from the EU members, the countries of the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership,

Great Britain, Norway, and Switzerland are also members. But it should be noted that the European political community is only a space where the leaders of the above countries talk, without having established structures and bodies, voting, agreements, etc. Staged accession assumes access to the internal market first. It is driven by the considerations of the neofederlism that economic integration will lead to political integration. That was successful in some cases in the countries that have similar political systems. It is questionable in the case of Western Balkan countries. The EU Eastern enlargement in 2004 which proceeded with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 represents a milestone in the evolution of European integration seen as a tool to consolidate economic and political transitions. The instruments employed in the process accomplished significant convergence that further increased after accession along with the positive effects on the side of the single market which despite the increased economic divergence among its current members, has become more integrated and dynamic. Moreover, the economic development of CEECs contributed to increasing the quality of institutions which indicates a linkage between the economic and political criteria. However, this approach achieved only limited impact on the Western Balkans (in North Macedonia particularly), whereby one of the main reasons is the impaired credibility of the enlargement process and the membership perspective. Stabilization and association processes have not delivered many of the economic benefits of accession ahead of full membership and overcome the gap in economic development in terms of EU-CEE. What is at stake today is rather consolidating what the EU has already achieved so far, including what was achieved through previous rounds of enlargement (Mihajlovic et al. 2023).

On the other hand, despite the political setbacks, the North Macedonia reform agenda does not progress so well. To start with the fundamentals, there is a need for more efforts towards including the rule of law, anti-corruption, the fight against organized crime, and fundamental rights. The country needs to improve electoral legislation, enhance the efficiency, transparency, accountability, and functioning of the judiciary, and deliver results in the fight against corruption and organized crime. EU in its progress report highlights concerns about the declining clearance rates for first-instance criminal cases, and attention towards the functioning of the independent management bodies of the judiciary, notably the Judicial Council. There is a need for legislative amendments and a more significant fight against corruption (EU Progress Report 2024).

CONCLUSION

North Macedonia's EU integration journey has been lengthy, challenging, and highly intricate. Numerous setbacks have occurred, some of which persist. The process currently faces an uncertain outcome, driven more by political

factors than by its actual substance. Various government administrations have alternately advanced or delayed EU integration, despite that all political agendas supported the goal. The stringent conditions, some of them unrelated to the core process, EU integration has stalled, partly due to the EU's functions and limitations and partly as a result of the domestic incapacity to sustain undertaken reforms. The previous government's only major success was bringing the country closer to the EU. However, steps taken without public backing led to its significant failure and heightened EU skepticism. The current right-wing, nationalist government is committed to maintaining an EU-focused future but insists this will not come at the expense of national identity. Past experiences reveal EU inconsistencies, unclear positions, and a lack of coherent policies towards North Macedonia, which have fueled nationalism, eroded democratic standards, impaired institutional impartiality, and worsened human rights conditions. Whether the new government can navigate external pressures, preserve its multiethnic coalition, undo previous damage, and restore credibility to the EU integration process remains a critical challenge, with the results yet to be seen in the years ahead. The internal challenges that the EU faces can be overcome with potential options for greater economic integration of the region with the EU. Although this option is perceived as second-class membership, some practitioners are seeing it as much better than the actual *status quo*. In any case, the EU has to maintain the focus on the democracy and rule of law promotion within the EU candidate countries. Although, without doubt, the reforms in North Macedonia need to continue, apart from the challenges related to the new enlargement methodology, if the current demands (and most probably eventual ones) related to the region's complex history persist within the negotiation framework, it is questionable that a clear outcome can ever be expected. Considering this, for a more meaningful EU integration process, steps need to be taken not only from the national political elite but also from the EU side. That is necessary since a credible accession perspective is the key incentive not only for North Macedonia but as well as for the whole region since it proves to be a main driver for its transformation.

REFERENCES

Akhvlediani, Tinatin. 2022. "Geopolitical and security concerns of the EU's enlargement to the East: The case of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia". *Intereconomics*, 57 (4): 225–228.

Abazi, Imeri Ardita and Aleksandra Ivanovska. 2017. "The Western Balkans' bumpy quest for EU integration". *European Policy Institute (EPI)*.

Kmezić, Marko and Florian Bieber. 2017. "Balkans in Europe. The crisis of democracy in the Western Balkans: Authoritarianism and EU stabilitocracy". *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group*.

Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group. 2016. "The migrant crisis: A catalyst for EU enlargement?" *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group.*

Chavkoska, Biljana, Natalija Shikova and Nikola Dacev. 2018. "Freedom of movement of goods in EU internal market with special reference on the goods from third countries". *In Traders*, 1: 380–391.

Chryssogelos, Angelos. 2019. "Macedonia's Name Change Deal Is a Triumph for the E.U., But Worrying for Democracy". *Time, January 22th*.

Damjanovski, Ivan. 2022. "Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2014–2021)". *Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia, Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' – Skopje.*

Damjanovski, Ivan. 2023. "Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2014–2023)." *Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia, Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' – Skopje.*

Declaration on Yugoslavia (Extraordinary EPC Ministerial Meeting) Brussels, 16 December 1991.

Democracy index 2023. 2023. "Our world in data". https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu

European Commission. 2012. "Enlargement strategy and main challenges 2012-2013." Accessed January 3th 2025. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri= CELEX:52012DC0673&from=EN

European Commission. 2023. "European neighborhood policy and enlargement negotiations: North Macedonia". Accessed January 3th 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/ detailed-country-information/north-macedonia_en

European Commission. 2024a. European neighborhood policy and enlargement negotiations (DG NEAR). Enlargement Package 2024. Accessed January 3th 2025. neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu

European Commission. 2024b. "Commission staff working document, North Macedonia 2024 Report". Accessed January 3th 2025. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5f0c9185-ce46-46fc-bf44-82318ab47e88_en?-filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202024.pdf

European Policy Centre (CEP) (n.d.). "The initiative for a staged accession to the EU". *CEP*. Accessed May 8th 2025. https://cep.org.rs/en/the-initiative-for-a-staged-accession-to-the-eu/

European Union Council. 2015. "Conclusions on the enlargement strategy". Accessed January 3th 2025. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21225/72921.pdf

Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia. 2023. "Documents". Accessed January 3th 2025. https://mfa.gov.mk/en/document/1712

Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. 2024. "Otcet, 100 dena vlada". October 10th. Accessed January 3th 2025. https://vlada.mk/node/37150

Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (n.d.) *Responsible government of North Macedonia.* https://odgovornavlada.mk/en.

Guidelines on the recognition of new states in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union, 16 December 1991.

Ivanov, Mihail. 1998. "Interpreting the term 'national minority'". *Balkanologie* 2(1):1–9.

Ivković, Aleksandar. 2023. "How to implement gradual accession to the EU: Single market, staged accession, or something else?" *European Western Balkans*, September 6th.

Jakov Marusic, Sinisa. 2024. "Albania and North Macedonia's EU 'decoupling' causes dismay in Skopje". *BIRN*, September 30th.

Kaytchev, Naoum. 2023. "Perspectives for North Macedonia's EU Integration after the French EU Framework Solution in 2022". *Foreign Policy Review*, 16(1):146–159.

Ljorovski Vamvakovski, Dimitar, Donche Tasev and Strashko Stojanovski. 2019. "The National mobilization in the Republic of Greece regarding the Macedonian question". *University Goce Delcev Stip, Academic Repository*, 1–22.

Maleski, Denko, 2022. "Independence through peaceful self-determination – the case of Macedonia". *In Youth involvement in a constructive dialogue: Communist Past in Contemporary Western Balkan*, ed. Nevila Xhindi, 38–42. Center for Change Management.

Manners, Ian. 2002. "Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2): 235–258.

Manners, Ian. 2006. "The symbolic manifestations of the EU's normative role in world politics". In *The European Union's role in international politics: Concepts and analysis*, eds. Elgström, Ole and Michael Smith, 66–84. Routledge.

Mihajlovic, Milena, Steven Blockmans, Strahinja Subotić and Michael Emerson. 2023. "Template 2.0 for staged accession to the EU". European Policy Centre (CEP) and Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS). Accessed January 5th 2025. https://cep.org.rs/en/publications/template-2-0-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/.

Milovanovic, Zlat. 2018. "Balkans in the European Union". In *Europe and the Balkans*, eds. Hudson, Robert, Ivan Dodovski and Marina Andeva. University American College Skopje.

Mirel, Pierre. 2022. "In support of a new approach with the Western Balkans: Staged accession with a consolidation phase". *European Issues, 633*.

Nikodinovska Krstevska, Ana. 2018. "Nutela versus nutela, Republika Makedonija versus FIROM". *University Goce Delcev Stip, Academic Repository*, 637–653.

Nova Makedonija. 2023. "Mickoski: The government will never give up on EU membership, but it will not do anything against the national interest". *Nova Makedonija*, October 1st. https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/mickoski-vladata-nikogash-nema-da-otstapi-od-chlenstvoto-vo-eu-no-i-nema-da-storineshto-shto-e-sprotivno-na-nacionalnite-interesi/

Noutcheva, Gergana. 2007. "Fake, partial and imposed compliance: The limits of the EU's normative power in the Western Balkans". *Journal of European Public Policy* 16 (7): 1065–1084.

OSCE. 1990. "Copenhagen Document". *OSCE*.

Ognjanoska, Leposava. 2022. "Reinforcing the EU enlargement policy towards Western Balkans: Access to the single market as a credible goal". *European Papers*, 7(2), 833–855.

Rich, Roland. 1993. "Recognition of states: The collapse of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union". *European Journal of International Law*, 4(1): 36–65. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.ejil.a035834

Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU institutional reform. 2023. "Sailing on high seas: Reforming and enlarging the EU for the 21st century". *Politico EU*.

Richter, Solveig. 2012. "Two at one blow? The EU and its quest for security and democracy by political conditionality in the Western Balkans". *Democratization*, 19(3): 507–534.

Richter, Solveig and Natasha Wunsch. 2019. "Money, power, glory: The linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 27 (1): 41–62.

Runcheva Tasev, Hristina. 2020. "European perspectives of North Macedonia: EU enlargement challenges". *TEPSA Briefs*.

Schimmelfennig, Frank and Sedelmeier Urlich. 2004. "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe". *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(4), 661–679.

Shikova, Natalija. 2023. "Tools and forms for the realization of internal self-determination: Access and integration". In *Self-Determination and Secession in between theory and practice*, ed. Natalija Shikova, 251–271. Springer.

Shikova, Natalija. 2021. "North Macedonia's bumpy road to the EU". *EURAC*. https://www.eurac.edu/en/blogs/eureka/north-macedonias-bumpy-road-to-the-eu

Siljanovska Davkova, Gordana. 2018. "За Преспанскиот договор и пошироко долго име, проширен предмет, асиметрија" (For the Prespa Agreement and the wider long name, expanded subject, asymmetry). *Nova Makedonija*. October 3th.

Vankovska, Biljana. 2021. "Преспанскиот договор, етницетот и националноста" (The Prespa Agreement, ethnicity and nationality). *Periodika*: 257–269. Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet Sv. Kiril i Metodij.