



Yazar/Author
Rejhan RAHMAN*

Makale Adı/Article Name

**A Comparative Analysis of Albania and North Macedonia's
Compliance with EU Accession Criteria**

*Arnavutluk ve Kuzey Makedonya'nın Avrupa Birliği Üyelik Kriterlerine
Uyumunun Karşılaştırmalı Analizi*

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Albania and North Macedonia during the 2020-2024 period, offering a comparative analysis of their EU accession paths and examining how the European Union's conditionality mechanism functions. With the introduction of the new negotiation methodology, which places the "fundamentals" namely the rule of law, judicial independence, and fundamental rights at the core, the research evaluates both countries' progress dynamics through indicators such as crossing the IBAR threshold and alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Albania, through judicial reform and full compliance with the CFSP, succeeded in opening the "Fundamentals" cluster in 2024. North Macedonia, however, did not fulfill the constitutional amendment condition, causing its accession process to come to a standstill. The study argues that EU conditionality produces meaningful results only when accompanied by internal political agreement and institutional strength. Freedom House democracy scores reveal that stable normative convergence depends on solid domestic reform rather than external pressure alone. Building on this insight, the study develops a hybrid explanation of EU enlargement based on the interaction of threshold effects, signal alignment, and institutional agency. The findings show that conditionality in the Western Balkans operates unevenly, with reform sustainability tied closely to institutional capacity.

Keywords: European Union Enlargement Process, Conditionality Mechanism, Institutional Capacity, Western Balkans, Albania, North Macedonia, European Integration.

ÖZ

Bu araştırmada, Arnavutluk ve Kuzey Makedonya'nın 2020 ile 2024 dönemi incelemeye alınmakta ve Avrupa Birliği üyelik süreçlerini karşılaştırmalı biçimde inceleyerek AB'nin koşulluluk mekanizmasının nasıl işlediğini analiz etmektedir. Yeni müzakere metodolojisinin "temeller" yani hukukun üstünlüğü, yargı bağımsızlığı, temel hakları kapsayacak şekilde merkeze almasıyla her iki ülkenin ilerleme dinamikleri, IBAR eşliğinin aşılması ve AB'nin Ortak Dış ve Güvenlik Politikası'na (CFSP) uyum düzeyi gibi göstergeler üzerinden değerlendirilmeye çalışılmaktadır. Arnavutluk, yargı reformu ve CFSP'ye tam uyum sayesinde 2024'te "Temeller" kümesini açmayı başarmıştır. Fakat Kuzey Makedonya anayasal değişiklik koşulunu yerine getiremediği için sürecin tıkandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırma, dışsal koşulluluk sinyallerinin ancak iç siyasal uzlaşma ve kurumsal kapasiteyle desteklendiğinde somut ilerleme üretebildiğini ortaya koymaya çalışmaktadır. Freedom House demokrasi skorları iki ülke için incelemeye alarak normatif uyumun sürdürülebilirliğinin sadece dış baskılarla bağlı değildir. Aynı zamanda iç reform derinliğiyle ilişkili olduğunu vurgulanmaya çalışılmıştır. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, AB genişleme politikasının etkinliğinin "eşik etkisi", "sinyal uyumu" ve "kurumsal aracı" mekanizmalarının birlikte işlediği karma bir modelle açıklanabileceğini savunmaktadır. Batı Balkanlar'daki koşulluluk sürecinin asimetrik sonuçlar doğurduğunu ve reformların kalıcılığı için iç kapasite inşasının belirleyici olduğunu da ayrıca vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği Genişleme Süreci, Koşulluluk Mekanizması, Kurumsal Kapasite, Batı Balkanlar; Arnavutluk, Kuzey Makedonya, Avrupa Bütünleşmesi.

Introduction

The of a normative nature to the EU. The region in question is for the EU an appendix in enlargement policy of the European Union (EU) towards the Western Balkans region is of great importance and terms of security, energy, trade and value systems. Accession of the candidate countries to the EU is to safeguard political stability and to promote democratic values in the candidate countries.

Albania and North Macedonia are two Western Balkan countries that are working to strengthen their democracies in order to join the European Union. Both countries are candidate countries and have to go through a long process of reforms in order to be able to join the EU. Albania was granted candidate status in 2014, whereas North Macedonia was granted candidate status already in 2005. However, for almost a decade, the country was not able to start accession negotiations due to a long-standing name dispute with Greece as well as tensions with Bulgaria in recent years. It was the European Council that in 2020 decided to open accession negotiations with both countries (EU 2020a). The first Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) for Albania took place on 19 July 2020 (Commission 2020c), and the screening process was completed on 24 November 2023 (Commission 2024a; NEAR 2023). For North Macedonia, the screening process was completed on 7 December 2023 (Commission 2023b, 2024c; NEAR 2023). It was already in 2024 when the first cluster of the negotiations, Cluster 1 (“Fundamentals”) was opened for Albania on 15 October 2024 (EU 2024), whereas for North Macedonia the opening of Cluster 1 has been postponed for constitutional reasons among others (Commission 2024c). Even though both countries started at the same point in time in a long process towards accession to the EU, there are big differences with regards to the accession progress of both countries over the last years.

The new approach to negotiations for the so called “Fundamentals” issues, introduced by the European Commission in 2020 (Commission, 2020c) for the countries that are in the process of membership negotiations, is gradually starting to produce results in the area of rule of law and fundamental rights and most importantly on the sensitive issue of independent judiciary, a fundamental condition for the whole enlargement process. Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) indicators set by the European Commission for the candidate countries for “Fundamentals” (rule of law) and for “short first package” of chapters (judicial independence and fundamental rights) are of critical importance for both Albania and North Macedonia. The same goes for the alignment with the European Union’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which also has become a crucial indicator of political credibility for the candidate countries. Their foreign policy can thus become either a facilitator or a “bottleneck” in their EU accession efforts, depending on the degree of their alignment with the EU acquis.

On the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) front, Albania is fully committed to supporting EU’s foreign policy choices. It was a 100% supporter of the recent round of sanctions on Russia (EEAS, 2025; House, 2024a). In the area of rule of law and related reforms to strengthen the sector, Albania reports positive progress. In this regard, there has been a strong commitment towards ensuring the full functionality of the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court of Justice. Progress was reported in terms of amending legislation to increase media freedom and to address corruption. However, while important progress has been reported in this area, same cannot be said for the implementation of the required judicial reforms as well as administrative reforms (Commission, 2020c).

North Macedonia continued the implementation of the new negotiation methodology for the new packages of 2022, after it had lifted the veto put by Bulgaria on the country’s accession talks in March 2020. The country’s EU integration agenda is however still being diverted by the outstanding bilateral issues that have not yet been resolved by the two sides. As far as CFSP is concerned, the country’s alignment record remains high (Commission 2024d). However, in the last period the country’s reform agendas have been instrumentalized, and in general the country is going through a period of domestic political turmoil. Consequently, big challenges for the

country are still pending also with a view to implement the necessary reforms for the country's progress in all the chapters under negotiation with the Union (Commission, 2024c). Although progress has been recorded in several fields, media freedom, judicial independence, and public administration reform continue to reveal both measurable advances and persistent structural deficiencies (Commission, 2023b).

The purpose of this study is to examine the negotiation processes of Albania and North Macedonia between 2020 and 2024 from a comparative perspective and to explain why the two countries have achieved similar results in certain areas while diverging markedly in others. The research focuses on two key variables:

- i. The crossing of the IBAR threshold (Chapters 23 and 24) and its accelerating effect on the pace of negotiations the Threshold Effect (Commission, 2020c, 2024a; NEAR, 2023)
- ii. The degree of alignment with the CFSP and its influence on political credibility and negotiation dynamics within the EU framework (Commission, 2024d; EEAS, 2025; House, 2024a)

The research additionally investigates how the independence of media regulators and institutional capability affect the long-term sustainability of reforms in the two countries. Adopting a small-N comparative framework with quantitative and qualitative triangulation, it focuses on the link between external conditionality and internal political developments. By doing so, it contributes to the understanding of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans through a theoretically consistent and evidence-based account of the differing negotiation speeds of two neighboring states with similar initial conditions.

1. Review of the Literature and Theoretical Background

Studies of EU enlargement in general and of the Western Balkans in particular are connected also to the studies of conditionality, to the concept of Normative Power Europe, and to the perspectives of regional stability. First, conditionality studies on accession analyze the process in terms of a reward-requirement logic and by examining how a country's progress through the accession process is influenced by the country's fulfillment of the terms on third countries and assess how the EU, as a 'normative power', promotes and exports requirements set for it. Second, studies on Normative Power Europe examine the influence that the EU ex values and interest to countries outside of the EU as well, in order to induce democracy, human rights, and values of a rule of law society. Third, studies on regional stability consider good-neighborly relations, and the solving of bilateral problems between the two countries as crucial to the enlargement process, cf. the European Council Conclusions for the Western Balkans that are constantly reconfirmed (EU 2020b; Manners, 2002; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Commission, 2020c).

To analyze the effect of conditionality on the accession process, two indicators have been developed to signal the effect of conditionality. The first indicator is the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) threshold that the accession process, as this is the last time that the country will be assessed by the set of a country needs to meet. For 2023, the closing benchmarks will be an important threshold in The second indicator is the alignment with the CFSP positions (EEAS, 2023). Most recently, the compliance and alignment findings benchmarks prior to the opening up of the so far closed 'Fundamentals' chapter in the negotiations. For both Albania and North Macedonia for 2024 have been presented in the respective 2024 Communications (Commission, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). The findings for both countries show a high level of compliance. North Macedonia exceeded the 100% compliance threshold in the relevant indicators, while Albania continued to show full compliance across all measured areas. For the analysis of conditionality, two additional institutional intermediate variables are included in the country-level assessment: the sub-indicators of democratic development, particularly judicial independence and press freedom, and the country-specific progress reported in the Commission's annual communications for Albania and North Macedonia, including the 2024 reports (Commission, 2024a, 2024c; House, 2024a, 2024b).

The effectiveness of conditionality is a function of the domestic political environment and of the quality of the country's institutions. Provided the degree of independence of the judiciary, of media and of public administration exceeds a threshold, conditionality translates into tangible changes. Below this threshold, however, conditionality produces mere formal changes. Against this background, while Albania's judicial reforms during 2020-2024 (Commission, 2024a) and North Macedonia's recurring bilateral challenges (Commission, 2024c) demonstrate how domestic and external dynamics converge.

Normative Power Europe value convergence, in particular concerning the rule of law and fundamental rights as well as media freedom, which constitutes the consistent reference point for the EU's evaluation of candidate countries. For this reason the study's thematic findings are connected to two sources. First, the European Commission's Progress Reports for Albania and North Macedonia dealing with the themes of justice, anti-corruption, elections and public administration (Commission, 2024a and 2024c). Second, the yearly democracy scores of the countries from the Nations in Transit report by Freedom House (House, 2024a and 2024b). The democracy scores of the yearly reports for the two countries under study allow for an interpretation of the country-specific developments from a perspective of institutional imbedding and of political competition. From this viewpoint also external signals, such as CFSP alignment, are perceived from within the countries' given normative framework.

A third perspective on conditionality is that of regional stability. As already noted in the literature on the enlargement process, candidate countries are not only expected to harmonize with the EU in terms of technical criteria for membership, but also manage their neighborhood relations and solve disputes that from time to time may also involve the Union. In the current external environment, Albania is progressing in a very stable external environment, while in North Macedonia issues from the past, also of an identity nature, are still very much present on the country's agenda. Even within the same conditionality framework, therefore, identical incentives will not trigger the same effects. The effects of conditionality are in fact context-dependent and are largely shaped by the regional environment in which countries are located (EU, 2020b; Commission, 2024c).

Building on this theoretical foundation, the study formulates three interrelated hypotheses within a comparative framework covering the period 2020-2024:

- (i) (H1) Threshold Effect: Attaining the IBAR threshold in the "Fundamentals" cluster represents a pivotal stage that prompts the establishment of closing benchmarks and speeds up negotiation dynamics (EEAS, 2023).
- (ii) (H2) Signal Alignment: A high degree of alignment with the CFSP enhances political credibility in the eyes of the EU and produces a positive relationship between negotiation speed and progress toward closure (Commission, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).
- (iii) (H3) Institutional Mediation: Institutional factors such as media regulatory independence, judicial autonomy, and administrative capacity act as moderator variables determining the extent to which external signals (H1-H2) translate into actual reforms. When institutional capacity exceeds a certain threshold, its effect is accelerating; below it, the impact is dampened (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2006; Jick, 1979).

In sum, these three hypotheses outline a mechanism of external conditionality and of domestic politics that is mediated by a normative alignment between EU CFSP practices and the member state's or candidate country's practices. Together, they explain the different speeds of the negotiations of Albania and North Macedonia between 2020 and 2024.

The study employs a small-N comparative design, and it relies on quantitative as well as qualitative triangulation. The dependent variable is the speed of the negotiations as well as their depth, as measured by countries' progress in the "Fundamentals" cluster of the Negotiation Agenda (Commission, 2023a-c), by the closing benchmarks that have been formulated, and by the degree of closure that has been reached.

The independent variable is the mechanism previously outlined, i.e. the external conditionality signaled by the IBAR status (EEAS, 2023) of the two countries under investigation, the domestic politics, and the normative alignment high or limited CFSP alignment (Commission, 2024a, 2024c) between the two member states and the EU, on the one hand, and the institutional capacity of the two countries under investigation, i.e. the degree of autonomy of the media authorities, the level of independence of the judiciary, and the overall performance of public administration, as measured by the Freedom House reports (House, 2024a, 2024b), on the other hand. Regional and bilateral disputes between member states are controlled for in the analysis as contextual variables (EU, 2020b). The time frame for the study is 2020-2024. The framework integrates findings from EU and Freedom House sources to connect external conditionality with the domestic institutional performance, and it explains why similar external pressures have led to different negotiation trajectories (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2006; Jick, 1979).

Table1: EU Progress Reports (2020-2024): Albania & North Macedonia (Democracy Scores, Freedom House)

Year	Country	Opened Cluster/Chapter(s)	Democracy Score	Description / Evidence
2020	North Macedonia	No record (negotiations officially blocked) ¹	3.75 ²	Negotiations did not start due to the blockade.
2021	North Macedonia	No record (blockade continued) ³	3.82 ⁴	No Council approval; the process remained stalled.
2022	North Macedonia	19 July 2022: First Intergovernmental Conference → screening launched ⁵	3.82 ⁶	Screening initiated for all clusters.
2023	North Macedonia	Screening completed (6 clusters, 7 December 2023) ⁷	3.86 ⁸	Screening concluded for all clusters.
2024	North Macedonia	Screening reports submitted to the Council; opening pending constitutional amendments and other conditions ⁹	3.79 ¹⁰	Cluster opening not yet realized.

¹ European Commission (2020). North Macedonia 2020 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2020_en

² Freedom House (2020). Nations in Transit - North Macedonia. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2020>

³ European Commission (2021). North Macedonia 2021 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2021_en

⁴ Freedom House (2021). Nations in Transit - North Macedonia. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2021>

⁵ European Commission (2022). North Macedonia 2022 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2022_en

⁶ Freedom House (2022). Nations in Transit - North Macedonia. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2022>

⁷ European Commission (2023). North Macedonia 2023 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2023_en

⁸ Freedom House (2023). Nations in Transit - North Macedonia. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2023>

⁹ European Commission (2024). North Macedonia 2024 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2024_en

¹⁰ Freedom House (2024). Nations in Transit - North Macedonia. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2022>

2020	Albania	No record (pre-negotiation preparation phase) ¹¹	3.82 ¹²	Period prior to screening.
2021	Albania	No record (preparation stage) ¹³	3.75 ¹⁴	Preparations for the screening process.
2022	Albania	Screening launched following the first Intergovernmental Conference ¹⁵	3.75 ¹⁶	Screening process began after the 2022 Conference.
2023	Albania	Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) screening report submitted to the Council ¹⁷	3.79 ¹⁸	Screening report delivered.
2024	Albania	Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) opened (15 October 2024) - 5 chapters: 23, 24, 5, 18, 32 ¹⁹	3.79 ²⁰	First cluster opened on 15 October 2024; five chapters entered negotiations.

2. Methodology and Data

The contexts of their respective domestic politics as well as the countries' normative alignment with the EU in analysis employs a multi-source, multi-level approach and examines the accession processes of Albania and North Macedonia within the 2020-2024 framework. To this end, the research applies a triangulation method, combining qualitative and quantitative data (Gerring, 2006; Manners, 2002; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Following a small-N comparative design, the analysis seeks to account for the differing trajectories of the two countries despite operating within the same enlargement framework and time frame (Commission, 2020c).

Three types of data were analyzed for this study. First, primary EU documentation, including European Commission country reports for Albania and North Macedonia between 2020 and 2024, EU Council conclusions related to enlargement, the EU's 2020 revised methodology for candidate countries' accession negotiations, and all EU CFSP-related material published by the European External Action Service (EEAS) (Commission, 2020c, 2024a, 2024c; EU, 2020b). Second, independent data sets and official negotiation records. The CFSP alignment variable was scored for the degree to which candidate countries participated in EU declarations and for their alignment levels as reported annually by the European Commission (Commission, 2024a, 2024c). The variable IBAR was derived from the Commission's documentation of the screening process and the classification of interim benchmarks (Commission, 2022b; EEAS, 2023; NEAR, 2023).

¹¹ European Commission (2020). Albania 2020 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2020_en

¹² Freedom House (2020). Nations in Transit - Albania. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2020>

¹³ European Commission (2021). Albania 2021 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2021_en

¹⁴ Freedom House (2021). Nations in Transit - Albania. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2021>

¹⁵ European Commission (2022). Albania 2022 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2022_en

¹⁶ Freedom House (2022). Nations in Transit - Albania. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2022>

¹⁷ European Commission (2023). Albania 2023 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2023_en

¹⁸ Freedom House (2023). Nations in Transit - Albania. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2023>

¹⁹ European Commission (2024). Albania 2024 Report. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2024_en

²⁰ Freedom House (2024). Nations in Transit - Albania. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2024>

The study uses Freedom House's Nations in Transit democracy sub-indicators, mainly judicial independence and media freedom. The secondary material also includes enlargement analyses prepared by CEPS, EPC, and Bruegel, since these studies provide useful discussion on the Western Balkan enlargement process and its limits (Blockmans, 2023; Commission, 2024a, 2024c; Moffat, 2024). The negotiation side of the material is more limited. It is followed through publicly available records on opened clusters and chapters, the screening process, and IBAR-related outputs. Because the full screening documentation is not public, the analysis here has to rely on the shorter summaries included in the European Commission's country reports (EEAS, 2023; Jick, 1979).

The analytical variables are directly derived from the theoretical framework. The dependent variable negotiation progress is operationalized through indicators reflecting threshold achievement within the Fundamentals cluster, the opening of chapters or clusters, and the specification of closing benchmarks (Commission, 2022b, 2024c). The independent variables are:

- (i) IBAR status (threshold reached / not reached) (EEAS, 2023);
- (ii) CFSP alignment, evaluated as high or hesitant according to Commission and EEAS assessments (Commission, 2024a, 2024c);
- (iii) Institutional capacity, measured by judicial independence, the autonomy of media regulatory bodies, and administrative effectiveness, based on qualitative evidence from Commission reports and Freedom House sub-indices (Commission, 2024a, 2024c; House, 2024a, 2024b).

The control variables include bilateral disputes (e.g., North Macedonia-Bulgaria) and the regional security setting (Commission, 2024c; EU, 2020b).

The analysis process was carried out in three stages.

- (i) The thematic findings in the Commission's country reports (judiciary, media, fundamental rights, CFSP alignment) were transferred into a systematic coding matrix (Commission, 2024a, 2024c).
- (ii) CFSP alignment and democracy scores were turned into annual comparative tables (Commission, 2024a, 2024c; House, 2024a, 2024b).
- (iii) IBAR thresholds and CFSP signals were matched with Freedom House fluctuations in order to test the interaction between external conditionality and internal capacity (Commission, 2024a, 2024c; EEAS, 2023; House, 2024a, 2024b).

Methodological limitations: As only a limited portion of the IBAR/screening documents is publicly available, the analysis relies on official Commission announcements and summaries included in country reports (NEAR, 2023). Although CFSP alignment data are primarily based on the EU's annual reports and statements, they are supported by qualitative assessments of the broader political context (Commission, 2024a, 2024c). While Freedom House scores enable cross-country comparison, they do not fully align with the EU's official methodology; therefore, interpretations have been made by considering both sources together (Commission, 2024a, 2024c; House, 2024a, 2024b).

The article compares Albania and North Macedonia in the 2020–2024 accession period, using the available official material and secondary sources. The focus is on how the two processes moved, where they slowed down or advanced, and at which points the difference between them became clearer. The issue is not only that one country moved faster than the other. The more important question is why two candidates that entered this period with broadly similar conditions later developed different negotiation rhythms. This difference is examined through the relationship between EU conditionality, domestic politics, and normative alignment (Commission, 2020c, 2022b, 2024a, 2024c).

3. Case I. Albania (2020-2024): The Balance Between Conditionality, Normative Alignment, and Institutional Capacity

Between characterized by two interconnected elements: the first refers to the methodology of the negotiation of the accession talks, 2020 and 2024, the progress of Albania in its integration into the EU has been ‘the fundamentals’; the second to the alignment with the CFSP decisions. The integration path of sufficient capacity of the country’s institutions and the high degree of the political competition have created at times constraints the country was thus characterized by two external elements that were interconnected and influenced each other. The lack of on the implementation of the reforms and on the integration process of the country. In March 2020, the EU Council approved the decision to open accession negotiations (EU, 2020a), yet the process effectively began with the First Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on 19 July 2022, when the Commission also launched the screening process for the *acquis* (EU, 2022a). By 24 November 2023, screening sessions had been completed across all six clusters, and on 15 October 2024, Cluster 1 (“Fundamentals”) was formally opened (Commission, 2024a). This opening encompassed five chapters 23. Judiciary and Fundamental Rights; 24. Justice, Freedom and Security; 5. Public Procurement; 18. Statistics; and 32. Financial Control which were officially opened for negotiation. In its 2024 report, the Commission observed that Albania continued to exhibit full (100%) alignment with the CFSP, reflecting complete enforcement of EU restrictive measures connected to the war in Ukraine (Commission, 2024a). However, also as regards SP measures and noted that the country has implemented fully all the measures adopted by the EU the implementation of the measures adopted by the EU to counter corruption and organized crime, the report assesses process and of the implementation of the provisions in force to the actual implementation of the commitments taken within the that Albania continues to face challenges. The Country is thus progressing from a stage of alignment with the integration framework of the accession negotiations.

The 2020 baseline, as reflected in the Commission’s country report, indicated that reform efforts were ongoing; however, persistent bottlenecks remained in the rule of law and judicial architecture (Commission, 2020a). The capacity recommendations for electoral reforms were the main determinants for the development within the “fundamentals” cluster of the highest judicial institutions, parliament and executive as well as longstanding challenges in Albania. Albania continued to sustain judicial reform efforts, strengthen the institutional framework of public administration and align with the EU positions as set out in the 2021 report (Commission, 2021). However, pending reforms on accountability and transparency, as well as the recommendations by OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission on electoral issues, are at the core of Albania’s on-going reform agenda. The findings further identify a continuing gap between the written implementation of reforms and the country’s ability to put them into practice.

2022 was a pivotal year for Albania as it started the screening process with the First Intergovernmental Conference. Screening, an instrument of the accession negotiations, in the frame of the implementation of the Economic Reform Program and public finance framework, brought certain progress and in the same time exposed the main shortcomings in the effective implementation of reforms already in place particularly in the areas pertaining to the “judiciary” and the “fundamentals” cluster. Thus, the merit-based selection criteria for public posts’ recruitment, judicial independence and the fight against corruption are areas where the screening process is becoming more than a mere technical matter (Commission, 2022a). It has now become a test of how far the implemented reforms have been consolidated into practice.

The completion of screening sessions in 2023 gave new momentum to the evaluation of opening conditions under the “Fundamentals” cluster. The Commission’s report recorded that Albania sustained full alignment with the CFSP, with clear evidence of full participation in EU sanctions and joint declarations issued in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, the report expressed concern over delays in electoral system reforms and the continued fragility of the media landscape.

With the end of the screening sessions held in 2023 to assess progress, the assessment of the criteria for opening up the 'Fundamentals' area of the Open Method of Coordination has been speeded up. According to the Commission's 2023 report, Albania fully implemented all obligations required by its full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and fully supported the EU's position in all EU statements in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine (Commission, 2023a). While progress is being made with the implementation of the required electoral reforms, the fragile developments in the media field have not yet been resolved.

The European Commission's 2024 report on Albania's progress towards EU accession notes that Cluster 1 was opened in October 2024, and that Albania continues to be fully aligned with the CFSP actions. The report stresses that further efforts are needed to strengthen the administrative and institutional implementation of the Council decisions. It looks at the recent changes to the Electoral Code, introduced in July 2024, including the introduction of decisions that are not currently being implemented by Parliament due to polarization. The report also covers issues such as diaspora voting, partially open lists, changes to the party quotient, vote secrecy, the prohibition of the misuse of public funds during elections, and increased transparency in campaign finance. It further notes that a number of OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations regarding the implementation of campaign finance rules in electoral processes have not yet been fully implemented. The report deals with EU actions on security issues in the region and Albania's participation in security operations and missions of the European Union, and in activities of the European Union-Albania Security and Defence Partnership that have started in spring 2024. Taken together, these developments suggest that EU conditionality has only a modest democratizing effect in the absence of sustained institutional strengthening.

The Commission's 2024 report confirmed that Cluster 1 had been officially opened and that Albania continued to align fully with the CFSP. It also pointed out that parliamentary polarization continued to impede institutional functioning, while amendments to the Electoral Code adopted in July 2024 made it possible for the diaspora to vote from abroad, revised partial open lists, and changed the party quotient calculation (Commission, 2024a). However, several OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations concerning vote secrecy, the misuse of administrative resources, and the regulation of campaign financing remained unfulfilled. The report also recorded that negotiations on the EU-Albania Security and Defence Partnership commenced in spring 2024 and that Albania continued to take part in CSDP missions (Commission, 2024a). These findings suggest that external alignment has only a modest democratizing effect when not accompanied by stronger domestic institutional capacity.

Data from Freedom House's Nations in Transit show that Albania's democratic score slipped from 3.89 in 2019 to 3.82 in 2020 (House, 2020a). It stayed at 3.75 through both 2021 and 2022 (House, 2021a; House, 2022a), rose slightly to 3.79 in 2023 (House, 2023a), and remained the same a year later (House, 2024a). These small variations suggest that while external alignment continued, the deeper processes of democratization remained largely stagnant, threatening the long-term stability of reforms.

4. Case II. North Macedonia (2020-2024): The Balance Between Conditionality, Normative Alignment, and Institutional Capacity

The accession negotiation process of North Macedonia between 2020 and 2024 offers a particularly rich case study of the interplay between conditionality and normative convergence on the one hand and domestic politics on the other. The European Council agreed to start negotiations with North Macedonia in 2020 (Commission, 2020b). However, the screening process was not able to start yet because of the Bulgarian veto. Only with the approval of the French proposal by the Bulgarian parliament in 2022 the Bulgarian veto was lifted and the screening could start in July 2022 (Oliver 2022). This example shows how the "threshold"-mechanism of conditionality is working in practice. However, the amendments to the constitution that are required prior to the opening of the chapters created a lot of sensitivity for the politicians.

By July 2023 the screening of the “Fundamentals” cluster in respect of the rule of law, judiciary and anti corruption had reached stage with a report prepared for the screening Council’s Working Group on enlargement within the Commission’s established timeline. No chapters have been opened in the meantime, as was the case in previous endeavors. Inability to fulfill the thresholds set by IBAR is caused by the same institutional capacity weaknesses which previously obstructed the reform of other areas. The EU progress reports for indicate very limited changes with respect to the judiciary and fundamental rights, while no changes of a measurable nature have taken place with respect to the implementation of the laws relating to elections and to media (Commission, 2024c). The bodies responsible for preventing and combating corruption are subject to political pressure. The media regulator in particular lacks functional autonomy.

Freedom House’s Nations in Transit tracks domestic reform patterns. The democracy score in 2020 rose to 3.75, showing small yet real progress in electoral practices and media freedom (House, 2020b). A year later, the figure increased to 3.82 as competition among political actors grew, while judicial reform remained slow (House, 2021b). The 2022 rating held at 3.82, highlighting persistent fragilities in the media and judicial systems (House, 2022b). A minor rise to 3.86 in 2023 came alongside intensified polarization and governance difficulties (House, 2023b). By 2024, the score declined to 3.79 as concerns over judicial independence and corruption resurfaced (House, 2024b). The fluctuation underlines how limited domestic capacity can blunt the effect of external conditionality.

North Macedonia has reached full alignment with the EU’s foreign and security policy by 2024. As mentioned before, the country fully implemented all sanctions on Russia and signed the EU Security and Defence Partnership ((EEAS), 2024). Those moves clearly helped its political credibility abroad. However, according to the Commission and several policy reports, North Macedonia faces several challenges such as the stalled electoral reform, the political pressure on the judiciary and above all a very thin layer of administrative capacity that would be able to put foreign policy aligned with the EU into practice (Commission, 2024c). We previously already mentioned the structural and regional dynamics that play a significant role. The history and language disputes with Bulgaria have created the possibility of a veto, which again hampers the framework of regional stability and good-neighbourliness promoted by the country (Index, 2024). This demonstrates that the strength of conditionality depends on local context and that sustainable normative alignment requires internal institutional support.

In conclusion, this case shows how the conditionality paradigm operates through constant interaction between its external thresholds and normative alignment dimensions, and the domestic dynamics of politics and institutional capacity. North Macedonia’s experience makes it clear that external incentives and signals can only be effective when supported by functioning institutions and political stability. In that sense, the process is shaped not only by pressure from the EU but also by the country’s own capacity for political compromise.

5. A Comparative Analysis of Albania and North Macedonia (2020-2024)

Analyzing the trend of changes over time in the normative alignment between Albania and North Macedonia, within the framework of the study, through the prism of the impact of the conditionality policy of the EU and of the internal politics of the two countries, it comes out that both countries started from a similar degree of compliance, as measured by the European Commission in 2020, when both were candidate countries, and then followed different paths. The conditionality policy has an impact only as long as there is consensus in the domestic politics of a candidate country. The political decision to open negotiations for both countries came on 25-26 March 2020, followed two years later by the first Intergovernmental Conferences on 19 July 2022 (Commission, 2020b, 2022c; EU, 2020a, 2022b). What began as a synchronized process soon split into two separate trajectories, shaped by institutional and political realities.

By late 2023, both Albania and North Macedonia had completed the screening stage, yet their negotiation tracks began to move in different directions in 2024. In October 2024, Albania opened the “Fundamentals” cluster (Cluster 1) together with five additional chapters 23, 24, 5, 18, and

32 covering justice, rights, and institutional control. This broad opening indicated that Albania had gone beyond meeting external benchmarks, it had begun to demonstrate the administrative readiness and reform depth the EU looks for in credible candidates. In this sense, the Albanian case shows that the “threshold effect” rests on governance capacity as much as on legal alignment. In North Macedonia, the EU Council conditioned the opening of negotiation clusters on the adoption of the pending constitutional amendments, which included the formal recognition of Bulgarians within the Constitution. As this requirement remained unmet by the end of 2024, no clusters were opened (House, 2020b, 2021b, 2022b). This outcome illustrates how the EU’s conditionality mechanism remains vulnerable to structural delays arising from regional disputes such as those with Bulgaria and from the lack of domestic political consensus. It also shows how even a minor bilateral issue can decisively shape the negotiation timetable. In this sense, the “threshold effect” depends not only on technical compliance but also on the capacity for political compromise. North Macedonia’s experience reveals that external incentives alone are insufficient when internal institutional capacity and social consensus are weak.

From a geopolitical signaling perspective, both countries projected a broadly similar stance. According to the 2024 Commission reports, Albania and North Macedonia maintained full alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including all declarations and restrictive measures. This alignment sent a strong and positive signal of political credibility, especially at a time when the EU’s enlargement policy had regained strategic momentum in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Commission, 2024a, 2024c). Achieving 100 percent CFSP alignment demonstrated that both candidates met the EU’s expectation of “geopolitical loyalty.” However, this high level of alignment did not translate into an equal pace of negotiations. Despite similar external signals, domestic political and institutional factors shaped the tempo of accession differently in each case.

In North Macedonia, deep political polarization and delays in constitutional change blocked the conversion of external alignment signals into actual negotiation progress. “Signal alignment” by itself proved insufficient to sustain momentum; democratic institutions, judicial autonomy, and a functioning executive legislative balance must evolve in parallel. In Albania, by contrast, judicial reform and the vetting process created at least partial room for external incentives to feed into domestic reform capacity. Hence, external conditionality has interacted with internal transformation in Albania but remained largely symbolic in North Macedonia.

Data from Freedom House-Nations in Transit indicate modest yet significant fluctuations in democratic performance across 2020-2024. In Albania, the score declined from 3.82 in 2020 to 3.75 in 2021, remained steady through 2022, and increased to 3.79 in 2023, holding steady in 2024 (House, 2020a, 2024a). In North Macedonia, scores improved from 3.75 in 2020 to 3.82 in 2021, reached a peak of 3.86 in 2023, and fell back to 3.79 in 2024 (House, 2020b, 2024b). Together, these figures show that both countries experienced short-term gains but eventually converged toward a plateau of democratic stability.

In 2024, Albania and North Macedonia happened to share the same democracy score 3.79 but for very different reasons. Albania’s performance reflected gradual progress in its anti-corruption drive, helped in part by SPAK’s steady work on corruption cases. North Macedonia’s figure told a different story. The amendments to the Criminal Code adopted in 2023 lowered penalties and affected several major investigations, which in turn weakened the country’s standing in the “judicial framework and independence” and “corruption” categories (House, 2023a, 2024b). These outcomes point to two distinct reform paths. Albania shows signs of institutional deepening, whereas North Macedonia reflects normative volatility. The sustainability of normative alignment, therefore, depends not only on external pressure but also on the continuity of domestic reforms, the effectiveness of implementation, and political stability. To visualize these changes, Figure 1. illustrates the yearly variation in democracy scores.

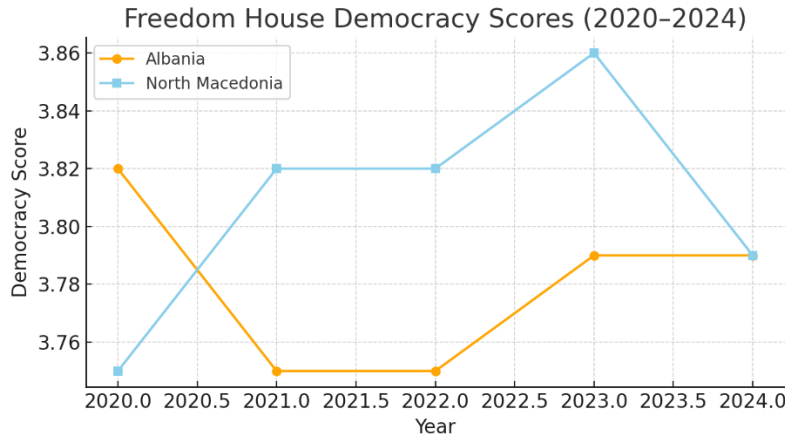


Figure1. Freedom House Scores (2020-2024)

The Commission's assessment in the domains of the rule of law and the judiciary reinforces this overall picture. According to the 2024 report on Albania, the judicial vetting framework has proven functional, with 98% of first-instance evaluations finalized, while the institutional capacities of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts have been enhanced. Nevertheless, enduring obstacles remain in ensuring a sustainable media environment, effective public administration, and consistent anti-corruption performance. (Commission, 2024). Collectively, these findings suggest that the EU regards Albania's reform-implementation capacity as only partially reliable, as the process of normative consolidation is still incomplete.

The North Macedonia report observes that the 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code undermined the country's anti-corruption framework. Nonetheless, it notes that North Macedonia has preserved full alignment with the CFSP and completed the screening process in December 2023. Still, the opening of negotiation clusters remains frozen until the constitutional amendment requirement mentioned earlier is met (Commission, 2024c). Therefore, despite having technically fulfilled its reform obligations, North Macedonia's accession negotiations are effectively blocked by political conditionality.

These findings confirm that external conditionality such as alignment with the CFSP alone is insufficient to generate genuine momentum; rather, the "transfer" of reforms depends on institutional capacity and domestic political consensus (e.g., constitutional reforms). In other words, the effectiveness of external incentives is contingent upon internal political stability and the capacity for institutional coherence. The conclusion that follows is that the balance between external incentives and domestic reform capacity is critical to the sustainability of the process. When this balance is disrupted, technical progress fails to translate into political outcomes, leaving the process at a merely symbolic level of alignment.

In terms of process management and chronological progression, the threshold effect has been most visibly tested in Albania. Following the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) and the completion of the screening process on 19 July 2022, the European Commission's decision to open Cluster 1 on 15 October 2024 within the framework of the 2024 Enlargement Package indicates that the opening benchmarks in the "fundamentals" cluster have been met and that the negotiation dynamic has accelerated (Commission, 2022c, 2024a, 2024c). This development demonstrates that EU conditionality functions effectively at the stage of transition from technical compliance to institutional endorsement.

In contrast, despite identical initial conditions in North Macedonia (the 2022 IGC and the completion of screening in 2023), the constitutional amendment requirement bearing a bilateral historical dimension created a bottleneck prior to the threshold stage. This outcome empirically confirms that the "regional stability/good neighbourly relations" parameter emphasized in the literature can directly affect the negotiation timeline (EU, 2022b; House, 2024b).

Accordingly, the case of North Macedonia empirically validates the notion of “political blocking factors” within conditionality theory. As a result, while the two countries’ democracy scores converged in 2024, their negotiation timetables diverged: Albania opened the fundamentals cluster, whereas in North Macedonia the opening remains pending due to constitutional conditionality. This divergence clearly reveals the asymmetric functioning of the conditionality domestic politics interaction model. A timeline summarizing the critical milestones of the process is provided in Figure 2.

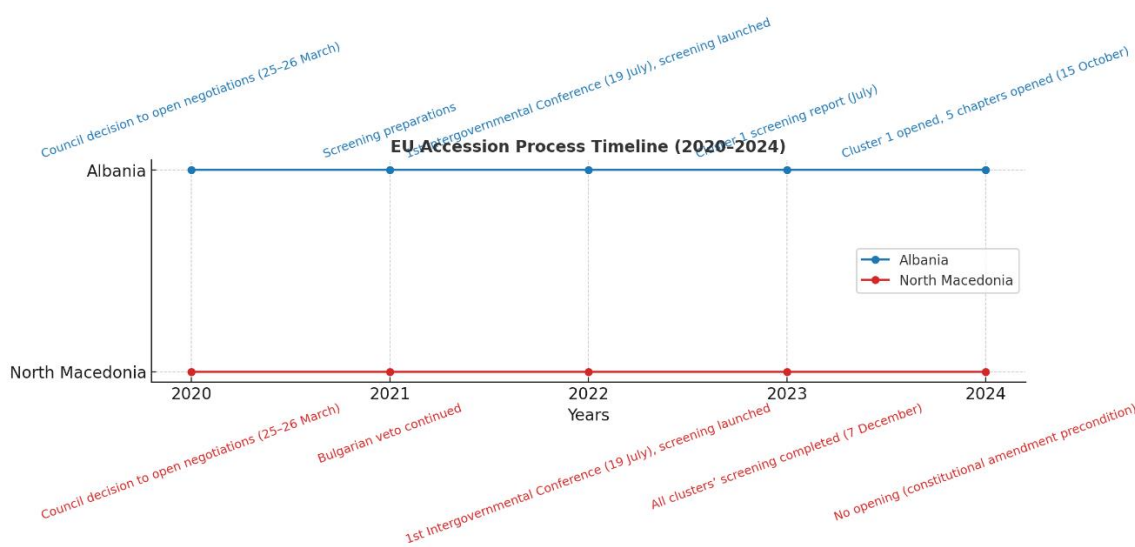


Figure 2. Eu Accession Process Timeline

This comparison supports the three arguments advanced in the earlier sections of the article:

- i. Threshold effect: Meeting the opening and closing benchmarks within the Fundamentals cluster has generated momentum (as in the case of Albania).
- ii. Signal alignment: Full compliance with the CFSP produced a strong geopolitical signal in both countries, yet proved insufficient on its own to ensure steady progress in the accession timeline.
- iii. Institutional intermediary: Institutional capacity in the judiciary and media sectors combined with domestic political consensus plays a decisive role in translating external conditionality signals into tangible negotiation steps (as illustrated by North Macedonia’s constitutional deadlock and its 2023-2024 judicial indicators) (Commission, 2023b, 2024a, 2024c; House, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b).

Accordingly, for the 2020-2024 period, the finding of “the same institutional framework but different outcomes” can be empirically demonstrated for both countries through evidence from the European Commission’s reports and Freedom House data. This outcome highlights the asymmetric impact of the EU’s conditionality paradigm in the Western Balkans showing that even under identical rule sets, divergent political and institutional results can emerge. The overall pattern is systematically summarized in the Hypothesis-Finding Matrix (Table 2) below. Thus, within the enlargement process, the dynamic of “same rules, different results” appears as a recurring feature across the Western Balkans.

Table 2: H1-H3 Hypothesis-Finding Matrix

Hypothesis	Expected Effect	Findings (2020-2024)	Assessment
H1-Threshold Effect	Crossing the IBAR threshold → acceleration in negotiations	Albania: Cluster 1 opened on 15 October 2024; five chapters launched.	Partially confirmed. Momentum emerges once the threshold is reached; however, progress stalls without

		North Macedonia: No opening due to the constitutional amendment condition.	domestic political consensus.
H2-Signal Alignment (CFSP Alignment)	High alignment → political credibility with the EU	Albania & North Macedonia: 100% CFSP alignment; full participation in sanctions against Russia.	Confirmed but limited. Political credibility achieved, yet insufficient by itself for timeline advancement.
H3-Institutional Mediation	Judicial independence, media freedom, and administrative capacity determine the effect of external signals	Albania: Judicial vetting 98% completed; Constitutional Court capacity strengthened. North Macedonia: Amendments to the Criminal Code weakened anti-corruption efforts; political polarization increased.	Confirmed. Institutional capacity and domestic politics shaped the effectiveness of external conditionality.

Taken together, the Albanian and North Macedonian cases illustrate that in the EU enlargement process, normative alignment operates not as a technical routine but as a political test. Albania's progress has rested on institutional stability, while North Macedonia's political gridlock has blunted conditionality's impact. A forward looking EU strategy in the Western Balkans therefore requires restructuring conditionality, tying reform rewards to sustainable institutional performance.

6. Limitations of the Study

In this study, the progress of Albania and North Macedonia in their EU accession paths during 2020-2024 was examined through a comparative lens. The chosen methodology possesses several strengths that strengthen the reliability of the results, yet it also presents certain inherent limitations.

To begin with, the combined use of quantitative and qualitative data allowed for methodological triangulation (Denzin, 1978), enabling cross verification between different types of evidence. This approach not only tested the coherence of observed patterns but also led to a methodological balance that integrates statistical indicators with the content analysis of relevant reports.

Second, the study relies primarily on authoritative sources such as official EU reports and the annual democracy indicators published by Freedom House. This reliance strengthens both the validity and traceability of the data used. In addition, the intersections among EU Progress Reports from different years were examined comparatively, which enhanced both the diversity of sources and the overall reliability of the dataset.

Thirdly, by adopting a small-N comparative design that concentrates on two cases, the study was able to explore particular mechanisms of the negotiation process such as constitutional conditionality and the dynamics of cluster openings in greater depth (George & Bennett, 2005). This design helped uncover how these mechanisms function and strengthened the causal interpretation of the findings.

However, some limitations must be noted. Because the analysis is confined to two country cases, the findings cannot be readily generalized to all Western Balkan states (Börzel & Risse, 2020). The evidence presented here should therefore be seen as drawn from a selective, non-representative sample that nonetheless provides meaningful analytical depth.

Secondly, the period covered by this research (2020-2024) is rather short, which makes it difficult to observe how long-term institutional patterns take shape. Developments such as judicial reforms or constitutional amendments usually unfold over time, and understanding their consolidation would require a longer horizon of analysis.

A third limitation concerns the temporal resolution of the data. Because the majority of indicators are available only in yearly form, the analysis cannot fully reflect short-term political turbulence or within-year variations. This constraint is most evident during periods of crisis for instance,

episodes of political boycott or protest which could not be traced with sufficient precision in their impact on EU negotiations.

Finally, due to the restricted availability of data, it is difficult to tell whether changes in areas such as CFSP alignment or media independence arise from domestic political factors or from external pressures (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). For these domains, clearer causal inferences would require supplementary datasets and systematic content-based inquiry.

In future research, three possible directions can be outlined. The first would be to widen the scope of comparison by including more Western Balkan countries, such as Montenegro and Serbia, within a medium-N design. Doing so would increase comparative variation and help make regional distinctions within shared dynamics more visible.

Second, using annual flow indicators like the dates when intermediate negotiation steps are completed could yield a more precise measure of progress. This would help capture the pace of change and enable a process oriented analysis that goes beyond the limits of static yearly reports.

Thirdly, incorporating variables such as bilateral disagreements, economic dynamics, and public opinion trends into the analysis could make it easier to trace how EU conditionality influences domestic politics. In this regard, both popular support and the strategic choices of political leaders should be treated as crucial elements for understanding the mechanisms linking conditionality with compliance.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The study compares the accession processes of Albania and of North Macedonia from 2020 until 2024. It focuses on the interplay between the conditionality of the EU and the domestic processes of both countries. The Enlargement process to the EU is not merely a 'Brussels-based' project; it is politically deeply rooted. It is influenced by the willingness and the capabilities of a country and its institutions as well as by civil society. In Albania implementation of already legislated steps of the reform process in the relevant areas (judiciary and environment) is satisfactory so far. However, lack of administrative and financial resources hampers in-depth-implementation, going beyond mere compliance with the *acquis*. This gap between written compliance and effective implementation will also continue to be a major concern for the EU in the future. The accession negotiations of North Macedonia are, until today, impacted by the ongoing tensions with Bulgaria as well as by the current political instable phase of the country. The effective conditionality by the EU requires corresponding incentives by the external actor and suitable conditions in the politics of the member state.

The evaluation structures currently used by the EU to monitor and measure the progress of candidate countries in a transparent manner and to provide a few lessons for the EU's policies towards candidate countries can be used in only a few areas. Firstly, the EU needs its own monitoring and results. The introduction of a 'closure barometer' with a set of indicators that are measurable and which focus on results would mean that in candidate countries' reforms are translated into practice and are on an ongoing basis monitored. Secondly, the implementation of conditional financial assistance needs to become more stable. For this purpose the EU should support the candidate countries in establishing their own audit structures, which are also seen to be independent from the candidate countries and which have an office in Brussels as well as in the candidate countries. In this way the enlargement process becomes more sustainable and the progress reports drawn up by the candidate countries on the implementation of the reforms currently being carried out are seen to be more credible. This would also increase public support in the candidate countries of the EU's commitment to supporting the reforms which are currently being carried out.

For Albania the strengthening of judicial independence as well as environmental reform has to go beyond legal approximation and requires sufficient administrative capacity as well as financial means. Strategic communication has to be directed towards an increased interest of the public as

well as an increased credibility of the processes of reform. Also the institutional capacity of anti corruption agencies as SPAK has to be strengthened in order to increase the legitimacy of the accession process. The financing as well as the staffing of these institutions in the long run will be decisive for the sustainability of the achievements so far.

The biggest challenge to North Macedonia in the biggest single obstacle to its EU negotiation process, are the outstanding issues with Bulgaria which need to be solved. However, the delay in the necessary constitutional changes is gradually eroding also North Macedonia's perspective for EU membership, and at the same time it is eroding also democracy in the country. For this reason, it is also important to keep the political stability in the country, i.e. to guarantee the continuity of the governance and to prevent the derailment of the reforms. To restore momentum, the changes to the constitution should be completed as soon as possible on the basis of broad consensus among all political parties.

Independence of media regulators and transparency of their appointment procedures need to be safeguarded in both countries. Media freedom is an important element for the consolidation of democracy and thus for the implementation of EU requirements. At the same time it is a crucial factor to win back the trust of citizens in public institutions. Therefore media sector reforms should be linked with anti corruption measures and instruments of accountability. The progress in this respect will be crucial for the accession strategies of both countries. The degree of media freedom is an important factor of public's confidence in political and judicial institutions as well as in the overall framework of accountability.

The in designing and implementing development strategies in Albania and North Macedonia depends greatly on how conditionality is translated into effectiveness of EU conditionality on hard and soft law introduced by Brussels as well as its perception and implementation practice by domestic politics of candidate countries. IGoing forward, enlargement policy should adopt a performance-based approach to conditionality, one that connects normative influence with visible, measurable progress. It has to bring normative pressure to bear on single countries in order to achieve concrete results domestic politics of candidate countries and their development by incorporating external incentives and using a performance-oriented approach to condition. Thus, the policy can increase its credibility and contribute to the democratization of the Western Balkans

Looking ahead, future research would benefit from medium-N comparative designs including more Western Balkan states, the use of annual "flow" data for a finer measurement of negotiation speed, and the inclusion of variables such as bilateral disputes and public sentiment. This would especially help us to better gauge the speed of negotiation as well as to include more issues in the speed of reform" by means of time-series analysis. In addition, a stronger analysis of conditionality. A more dynamic research design would not only be of more value for scholars than the current research but also give more substance to the sustainability of domestic reform capacity. In conclusion, the endurance of conditionality depends not on external pressures, but on the sustainability of domestic reform capacity.

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