

STUCK IN THE EUROPEAN UNION ACCESSION PROCESS: VIEWS FROM NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA

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Abstract

After 23 years since the establishment of the European perspective for the Western Balkans, at the Thessaloniki European Council Summit in 2003, the Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia are stuck in their European integration processes and far from full EU membership. Although the two countries are at different stages of the accession negotiations, there are similarities and differences determined by the national approaches to European integration. On the other hand, the EU institutions in the accession negotiations with these candidate countries, as well as with the other countries of the Western Balkans, instead of reaching an agreement and highlighting a clear political will for enlargement, providing strong support for the process based on criteria and results, are essentially introducing new criteria and new modalities of accession. We are witnessing bilateral issues that “magically” become European or different approaches to the territorial integrity that the EU is currently defending in Ukraine, the rule of law and democratic processes that are also regressing and becoming a challenge also in individual EU member states.

Although the EU enlargement policy is often assessed as successful and largely depends on the reform potential of the candidate countries, we are witnessing the disastrous results of the enlargement policy in the Western Balkans, to which the EU and its institutions have contributed in no small way. The war in Ukraine woke up the EU, raising the enlargement process high on the list of priorities, which now also carries a pronounced geostrategic and security component. The Western Balkans were neglected and put on the back burner, due to the need for internal reform of the Union, the introduction of a new methodology in the negotiation process and often with a sense of experimentation and the creation of new additional conditions in the accession process. Using the historical method and analyzing the legal norms and current developments in the EU related to the enlargement process, the author conducts research that shows the specifics of the enlargement or accession process. The emphasis is placed on the changes in the

accession process, bilateral disputes and the Union's increased sensitivity to the rule of law and the values of the Union. They contribute to the stagnation of North Macedonia and Serbia in the accession process, which seems to be becoming an impossible mission, with a logical constant decline in popularity and trust in the EU among the citizens of both countries.

Keywords: *stuck accession, new methodology for negotiations, bilateral disputes, Euroscepticism, Western Balkans*

1. Introduction

The EU enlargement process is presented by European institutions, especially the European Commission and the European Parliament, as one of the EU's most successful foreign policy achievements. However, since the large-scale enlargement of 2004, and the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the enlargement process has been at a "dead end". Future enlargement and the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, presented at the Thessaloniki European Council Summit in 2003 (with the exception of Croatia), have been postponed due to enlargement fatigue, reform of the founding treaties, the need to absorb new member states and changes to the functioning of the main EU institutions in the format of 27 member states. In general, the position of the European Commission and individual member states on the necessity of enlargement to the Western Balkans is declarative and contrary to the majority of member states, which are either completely uninterested in or oppose further enlargement of the Union. The marginalization of the enlargement process in the last two decades has been contributed by foreign policy crises and challenges from the economic crisis of 2008, the migrant crisis of 2015, electoral processes in the member states and the elections to the European Parliament, the strengthening of right-wing and populist movements, Brexit, the Coronavirus pandemic, the frequent use of vetoes by member states in making key decisions within the EU, as well as democratic regression in respect for common values and the rule of law in some of the newly admitted EU member states. Dealing with these crises and with oneself in relation to more supranational powers or more sovereignty within the EU, led to a complete halt to the enlargement to the Western Balkans in the period 2014-2019, when the then Commission announced that there would be no enlargement during its mandate and that enlargement was not a priority in its work. At the same time, this wandering of the EU was accompanied by the expansion of the political and economic influence of other geopolitical actors in the Western Balkans, primarily Russia and China.

In this paper, the author starts from the legal basis of the enlargement process in the primary law of the EU and its unpredictability. The key points of research are the processes that take place around the accession of the Western Balkans, more specifically North Macedonia and Serbia, from the adoption of important documents that change the accession paradigm and initiate the dramatic jamming of these two countries in the accession process, then the role of individual EU member states that with blockades make the accession process completely meaningless and present the Union as an idealless and duplicitous community of states, confusion and the introduction of foreign policy, geostrategic and security components as predominant in the accession process after Russia's aggression against Ukraine. At the end, the disappointment and feeling of humiliation of the nations was presented, as well as the responsibility of the national elites for the spread of anti-EU narratives in order to avoid making difficult political decisions and preserve power.

2. The legal basis and unpredictability of the EU enlargement process

The primary law of the EU, more precisely the Lisbon Treaty currently in force, is very narrow and sparse in relation to the enlargement process, i.e. the EU accession process. Given its content, in particular Title 3 on the institutional framework of the Union and Title 5 on General provisions on the Union's external action and specific provisions on the Common Foreign and Security Policy, its nature is essentially institutional and political with elements of a constitutional nature contained in common values, guarantees of fundamental rights from the EU Charter and democratic principles. All these provisions are part of the accession process and individual chapters of the accession negotiations for candidate countries, while the legal basis for accession in *stricto sensu* is found in Article 49 of the EU Treaty, in its transitional and final provisions. According to it, "any European State which respects the values set out in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union. The European Parliament and the national parliaments shall be informed of this application. The State applying for membership shall address its application to the Council, which shall act unanimously after consulting the Commission and after obtaining the assent of the European Parliament, which shall act by a majority of its component members. The conditions of admission agreed upon within the European Council shall be taken into account. The conditions of admission and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the Union is founded which such admission entails shall be the subject of an agreement between the Member States and the State applying for membership. That agreement shall be subject to ratification by all the Contracting States in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements." (Treaty of Lisbon, 2016, Article 49 TEU)

Part of the legal basis for enlargement is found in Article 21, which states that the Union's action on the international scene is based on the principles which have inspired its creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to promote in

the rest of the world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and international law. What is important for the initial phase of accession, namely the conclusion of the Stabilisation and Association Agreements that the EU has concluded with all the countries of the Western Balkans, is provided for in Article 37 TEU, which enables the Union to conclude agreements with one or more countries or international organisations in areas relating to the common foreign and security policy.

A brief analysis of the legal basis for enlargement contained in the norms of EU primary law sheds light on two key details for understanding the accession process. First, the formulation contained in Article 49 on unanimity in decision-making in the Council of the EU clearly implies a political dimension to the process, which empowers Member States to stop the accession process by vetoing it at various stages of the accession process, from the start of negotiations, the opening of chapters or clusters to the closure of negotiations. This is clearly seen in the processes of previous enlargements, especially in the accession process of the Western Balkan countries, which *in ratio legis* within the Council of the EU facing long-term blockages, deeply politically motivated by a group of Member States or individual Member States. To make matters worse, the ratification of accession agreements in accordance with the constitutional rules of the Member States for candidate countries seems to be an additional exhaustion and prolongation of accession depending on internal political processes and constitutional constraints in the Member States. Secondly, the accession process requires the acceptance of the common values of the Union and is an integral part of its international action within the framework of which the Union concludes international treaties such as Stabilisation and Association Agreements which are between primary and secondary law in terms of their legal force, while Accession Treaties are an integral part of primary EU law.

Some authors consider that Articles 49 and 2 of the Treaty on European Union establish the political and value requirements for enlargement. The enlargement criteria adopted within the framework of the European Council play an important role in the accession process. (European Parliament, 2025.) They represent the strategic guidelines on the basis of which the Commission has built the negotiation process with the candidate countries based on the evaluation of the merits and institutional assessments. The Copenhagen criteria, supplemented by the Madrid criteria, are formulated in Article 49 TEU as conditions for acceptance by the European Council.

The Copenhagen criteria, defined at the Copenhagen European Council summit in 1993, following the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty on the EU, represent an upgrade of the newly established political cooperation in the field of foreign and security policy and relate to democracy and the rule of law, explicitly formulated as a prerequisite for the accession of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe after

the fall of the Berlin Wall and the new geopolitical reality. Thus, the Copenhagen criteria include:

- stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- a functioning market economy capable of coping with competition in the EU market;
- the ability to take on the obligations of EU membership, including respect for the objectives of political, economic and monetary union and the administrative capacity to implement and enforce EU law. (EUR-LEX, Copenhagen Criteria). Of particular importance for the countries of the Western Balkans are the conclusions of the European Council from the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, which offer these countries a European perspective, that is, the perspective of future membership. (Council of the European Union, 2003).

The accession process is defined as a merit-based process consisting of 3 steps: 1) Application for membership, 2) Negotiations for membership and 3) Accession. It is a combined political-technical process in which the Commission is responsible for the technical, administrative and evaluation part of the process, while decisions on granting candidate status, opening and closing negotiations and individual chapters or clusters, as well as the final accession procedure itself, are in the hands of the Member States within the Council of the EU and the European Council. The political will and readiness of the Member States for further enlargement is most often the decisive segment that contributes to the unpredictability, acceleration or deceleration or stopping of the enlargement process. The accession process itself is a complex, long-term, arduous process and requires constant adaptation, reforms and overall commitment not only of the negotiating teams of the candidate countries but also of the readiness of the entire society to the changes that the harmonisation and implementation of EU legislation entail. However, successful cycles of EU enlargement depend not only on the reform process in the candidate countries and external assistance, but also on the quality of democracy, efficient processes, good governance and absorption capacity of the EU institutions and the EU Member States themselves (European Parliament, 2025, p. 6).

The accession of the Western Balkan countries is monitored and coordinated by the Commission's initiatives and the agreement of the Member States, i.e. the Council of the EU and the European Council on enlargement strategies. Annual and multi-annual strategies and benchmarking through monitoring of the annual progress of the candidate countries was a standard procedure conducted by the Commission. During the Juncker Commission, the momentum for enlargement was not only lost, but “negative momentum was established”(Trauner & Nechev, 2018, p.280).

In the immediate aftermath of the migrant crisis, with the EU's enlargement fatigue and its closedness to new member states still evident, and towards the end of the Commission's mandate in 2018, in order to somehow mitigate this negative

momentum, an enlargement strategy covering the entire Western Balkans region was adopted (European Commission, 2018). The process of monitoring annual progress and a complete recomposition of the enlargement process follows the adoption of the New Enlargement Methodology from 2020 (European Commission, 2020). Among the more recent documents that follow the dynamics of enlargement, the predictability and unpredictability of the process, the Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews from 2024 (European Commission, 2024) and the Communication on enlargement policy for 2025 stand out (European Commission, 2025). All these documents essentially harmonize and change the conditions for enlargement to the Western Balkans as a reaction to negative experiences and backlash processes after the major enlargement and the accession of Croatia in 2013. This regression process and its measurement will take the form of an annual evaluation from 2020. The introduction of the Rule of Law Report in EU Member States was preceded by the EP's long-standing insistence on establishing a mechanism for monitoring the rule of law within the EU that also includes candidate countries (European Commission, 2026, p.12) .

3. The Republic of North Macedonia and the Republic of Serbia in the vortex of accession after the adoption of the new enlargement methodology

The Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans, adopted during the Juncker Commission's mandate (2014-2019) before the EP elections, was intended to be a starting point and a roadmap for the new Commission to accelerate the enlargement process in the region. The Western Balkan countries saw it as a decisive impetus and hope that the Union was close to the necessary political decision on enlargement that could be completed in the foreseeable future, with serious efforts by the candidate countries to adopt and implement the necessary reforms and align their legislation with the EU acquis. For Serbia and Montenegro, it set deadlines for the completion of negotiations (by the end of 2023) and accession by 2025. At that time, there was enthusiasm for EU membership in Serbia, especially in the public appearances of politicians and the work of the public administration, which was taking serious steps in accepting and implementing EU legislation.

For the Republic of Macedonia, which received candidate status in 2005 and has been implementing the European agenda and reforms without opening negotiations due to the name dispute with Greece, the 2018 Strategy was an additional argument to resolve the dispute and open space for accelerating its Euro-Atlantic integration. Interestingly enough, the Prespa Agreement with Greece on changing its name to North Macedonia was signed 6 months after the publication of the aforementioned Strategy.

After the 2019 European Parliament elections and before the new Commission took office, France vetoed the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia at the European Council summit in Brussels on 18 October 2019, while

the opening of negotiations with Albania was vetoed by the Netherlands and Denmark. France's position once again demonstrated the spirit of De Gaulleism and skepticism towards enlargement, which has been a constant since the time of Great Britain's accession to the EEC. It is a very negative perception towards the expansion, which is due to public opinion and the support of about 10% of French citizens who support the expansion to the Western Balkans, which is due to the belief that by accepting new member states, France weakens its geopolitical and strategic influence within the Union. The essential founding states of the EU, more precisely the European Communities, without Italy but with Denmark through the previous stages of accession, have profiled themselves as a "hard core" inclined to use the veto and block the enlargement process. Under the pretext of the necessity of reforming the accession process as well as internal reforms of the EU itself, French President Emmanuel Macron proposed the adoption of the New Enlargement Methodology presented by the new Commission in February 2020.

In March 2020, the Council of the European Union and the European Council officially approved the new enlargement methodology and agreed to apply it to the accession process of Albania and North Macedonia. Thus, the 2018 Western Balkans Enlargement Strategy remains a dead letter on paper, and the enlargement process itself takes on a new format and physiognomy.

The document calls for a stronger emphasis on addressing "structural weaknesses" in the candidate countries regarding the foundations of the rule of law and democracy and placed greater emphasis on the foundations and enabled "stronger political governance" by the EU member states (European Parliament, 2025). The scope of the new methodology will greatly change the landscape of enlargement and, according to some research, has had a stronger impact on the integration process of the Western Balkan countries than the war in Ukraine (Butnaru-Troncotă, 2025, p. 16)

4. Bulgarian veto blocks the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia

One of the first tests of the "success" of the new methodology and the increased individual influence of the member states on the enlargement process is Bulgaria's entry into the hard core of the brakers and joining France in blocking the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia. Namely, in November 2020, Bulgaria vetoed the opening of negotiations, introducing into play par excellence the bilateral historical identity issue of the existence of the Macedonian language and the Macedonian nation, contrary to the UN Charter and UNESCO's classification of world languages, where the Macedonian language is recognized and belongs to the group of Indo-European, Slavic, or South Slavic languages (UNESCO 2026). These demands by Bulgaria are considered illegitimate under international law because they

represent interference in the internal affairs of North Macedonia and call into question its right to “self-determination” (Buldioski & Tcherneva, 2020).

In the Explanation of the Veto, Bulgaria stated that it expects North Macedonia to recognize that the language spoken by the Slavic Macedonian majority in North Macedonia is not “Macedonian” but Bulgarian or its dialect, to abandon any demands towards the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria and to end its anti-Bulgarian rhetoric (Butnaru-Troncotă, 2025). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU enlargement overnight became “a strategic geopolitical investment in peace, security, stability, cooperation, common values and prosperity across the European continent” and Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are applying for EU membership. In June 2022, the European Council supports the positive opinions and recommendations of the Commission, recognizing the European perspective of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and granting Ukraine and Moldova the status of candidate country (European Parliament, 2025, p.8) As a result, France's position towards the Western Balkans is softened and the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia is initiated.

During its presidency of the Union in the first half of 2022, France, together with the Commission, is putting pressure on Bulgaria to accept the so-called French proposal, which represents the negotiating framework for the opening of negotiations. The proposal leads to the decision of the Bulgarian Parliament to lift the veto, or rather transform the veto, which will in fact be part of the conclusions of the Council of the EU on the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia from 18.07.2022. This is a typical example of the exploitation of EU membership based on the principles of solidarity, loyalty and mutual assistance between member states, which gives Bulgaria the strength and support of the other 26 member states in the dispute with North Macedonia. This turns a bilateral issue into a European one and represents the Union's position in the negotiation process. The EU Council defines this as the necessity of respecting bilateral agreements, primarily the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborhood and Cooperation with Bulgaria. The importance of the agreement on the protocol from the second meeting of the Joint Intergovernmental Commission established in accordance with Article 12 of the Agreement with Bulgaria is emphasized, which should enable equal rights for national minorities and communities in North Macedonia, which is linked to the fulfillment of the Copenhagen political criteria, constitutional changes and the introduction of the Bulgarian national minority in the Constitution, which becomes a condition for the continuation of negotiations that have not even started. Negotiations with North Macedonia will formally begin on 19.12.2022. at the First Intergovernmental Conference, where the next steps and priorities will be determined after the adoption of the Negotiating Framework from the EU Preamble. The very start of the negotiations, the presentation of the Negotiating Framework and the opening of the first negotiation chapters are postponed to the next Intergovernmental Conference, which will be held immediately after North Macedonia fulfills its

obligations regarding the constitutional changes (Council of the European Union 2022).

In its latest Resolution dedicated to the EC Report on North Macedonia for 2025, the European Parliament also pointed out the necessity of constitutional changes and respect for the conclusions of the EU Council from 2022, stressing that the delay in the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia contributes to the expressed negative perception of its political representatives and citizens about the prospects for EU accession. The EP reminds that bilateral disputes between countries should be resolved through open dialogue and that they should not be instrumentalized in the accession process. It emphasizes that linguistic, cultural and national identities are the true foundation of any country and should not be questioned by third parties. The EP points out that such issues should not affect the process of accession to the EU, which is aimed at implementing the legal acquis of the EU and aligning it with the values and principles of the EU established in the Copenhagen criteria and principles of good neighborly relations. Negotiations should be conducted on the basis of objective criteria and based solely on merit. The EP's wording condemning all attempts to replace historical monuments and/or artefacts, including the destruction of authentic cultural heritage, is quite striking, deploring the destruction and forgery of Bulgarian inscriptions. The EP will encourage the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission for Historical and Educational Issues of Bulgaria and North Macedonia, established by the Agreement on Friendship, Good Neighborly Relations and Cooperation with Bulgaria, in achieving clear and tangible results. It also emphasizes that the documents of this Commission should reflect the interpretation of historical facts and figures from the common history of both nations based on objective and credible historical sources and evidence-based documents, scientific interpretation of historical events, as established in the second protocol attached to the Treaty with Bulgaria (Europski parlament 2026).

The European Commission in its Communication on Enlargement for 2025, in addition to its positive evaluations, notes that North Macedonia has not made constitutional changes that would include in the Constitution citizens who live within its state borders and belong to other nations, such as Bulgarians, although it has undertaken to initiate and implement those changes in accordance with the obligations assumed from the conclusions of the EU Council from 2022. In addition to the implementation of bilateral agreements with neighboring countries, among others the Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia and the Treaty on friendship, good-neighborly relations and cooperation between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, the EC emphasizes that after meeting the conditions, North Macedonia should intensify the implementation of reforms within a set of basic chapters, in order to preserve the rule of law, especially by protecting the independence and integrity of the judiciary, as well as by strengthening the fight against corruption and organized crime (European Commission, 2025, p. 26). At the end of this presentation of the positions of the EU institutions, it should be added the

statement of the President of the European Council, Antonio Costa, of 02 June 2026, during his visit to North Macedonia, that "the adoption of the agreed constitutional amendments remains a necessary next step towards the formal start of accession negotiations".

5. Stuck accession from Serbia's perspective

The process of the Republic of Serbia's accession to the EU has its own specificities and characteristics that are quite different from any other Western Balkan country and that significantly affect the slowdown and stagnation in the accession negotiations. Serbia has been a candidate for membership since 2012 and accession negotiations were opened in 2014. Serbia decided in 2020 to continue negotiations according to the new methodology for enlargement and by 2026, 22 out of 35 negotiation chapters were opened. The last negotiation chapter was opened in December 2021. One of the specificities of Serbia's accession negotiations and EU membership defined as a strategic priority is the parallel political and economic cooperation with China and Russia. Chinese investments in Serbia have increased significantly in the last 10 years and in 2024 a free trade agreement was concluded.

Serbia has the lowest level of alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy and is the only country in the EU accession phase that did not impose sanctions on Russia after Russia's aggression against Ukraine. On the other hand, it supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea. It voted for the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning the aggression against Ukraine. It has been exporting weapons to Ukraine through intermediaries since the beginning of the conflict, the value of which is estimated at \$1 billion.

Another characteristic of Serbia is its security positioning in the global security architecture. Serbia opted for military neutrality in 2007, while simultaneously establishing military cooperation with NATO within the Partnership for Peace. Among the Western Balkan countries, Serbia stands out for having the largest number of bilateral defense agreements with EU member states. Serbia conducts military exercises with various partners. For example, it continues to be involved in exercises with actors from the United States (US) and the EU, including organizing the regular exercise "Platinum Wolf" (Platinum Wolf, 2026). To this should be added the fact that Serbia has expanded its political and economic cooperation with China to include military cooperation through joint military training activities, such as the 2025 Peacekeeper exercise. In its resolution of 8 July 2026 on the Commission's 2025 Report on Serbia, the European Parliament expressed concern about this cooperation. As for military cooperation with Russia, it was suspended after the aggression against Ukraine, while from 2015 to 2021, Serbia participated in the trilateral exercise "Slavic Brotherhood" together with the Russian armed forces (Briefing EPRS, 2026).

To further thicken the fog surrounding accession negotiations and foreign policy orientation, Serbia is currently negotiating a strategic partnership with the US,

with a serious political bias towards the US administration and Trump personally, so that foreign policy priorities are directed towards the US and China, while the EU and Russia are perceived as less important centers of power. (S. D., 2026). Jović-Lazić (2026) labels all of the above characteristics as a foreign policy of strategic ambiguity, based on indecision, balancing, and a pragmatic multi-card game. Another characteristic of Serbia's EU accession process is the change of narrative accompanied by a fundamental change in the approach to the EU. Namely, in Serbia, for a long time, public statements by the highest political representatives have avoided mentioning EU membership, but instead have spoken about Serbia's European path. Although it is emphasized that this is a terminological adjustment and that EU membership remains a strategic goal, this change marks a turning point in the accession process visible in the last 5 years. The reasons are twofold. Serbia's European path means slowing down and selectivity in the accession process, i.e. harmonization and implementation of European legislation in areas of interest to Serbia without the necessary conclusion of negotiations and EU membership. In this specific case, economic integration, investments, job creation and economic growth take precedence over chapters on foreign and security policy. Insisting on preserving territorial integrity in negotiations on normalizing relations with Kosovo is a red line, while the rule of law, protection of human rights, democracy, functional institutions, an independent judiciary, the fight against corruption and organized crime, as well as fair and honest electoral conditions are not high on the list of priorities. The second reason is of an internal political nature, given the Euroscepticism and opposition to EU membership among a significant part of the electorate in Serbia.

Although some member states and some EU institutions, especially the EP, are losing patience, the European Commission and the European Council are hesitant to cancel Serbia's membership perspective for geostrategic reasons. Namely, patience and the gradual linking of Serbia, as the largest country in the Western Balkans, to the West also means suppressing the remnants of Russian influence in the region, while countering Chinese influence is done precisely by continuing economic cooperation and investments by member states in the Serbian economy. However, the rejection of the EU Council in June 2026 for Serbia to open Cluster 3, despite the positive recommendation of the Commission, seems to indicate a change in the EU's approach to negotiations with Serbia.

Some research conducted within the EU institutions indicates the regression of Serbia, which continues to lose its democratic potential and regress in its progress, describing it as a "competitive authoritarian regime" due to the process of "state capture" and authoritarian tendencies (European Parliament, 2025, p. 25). It is recognized that although the government continues to proclaim EU membership as its strategic goal, the actual pace of reform implementation is nowhere near what a clear and open accession process requires. It is suggested that the polarization in Serbian society is further deepening after the mass protests organized throughout Serbia since November 2024. It seems that the Union's insistence on tangible results

in the fight against corruption and strengthening the rule of law, including the independence of the judiciary, media freedom, electoral reforms, ensuring a truly stimulating environment for civil society and credible efforts to stop the spread of disinformation and foreign manipulation of information should continue in order for Serbia to progress on its path to the EU (European Commission, 2025).

The new enlargement reform is expected to be presented by the Commission at the end of September, while the European leaders should hold a strategic discussion on enlargement and internal reforms of the Union at the European Council meeting on October 15 and 16.

All this coincides with the announced extraordinary elections in Serbia, which should be held at the end of October 2026 and which will represent the final test of Serbia's democratic potential and its determination for or against accelerating the EU accession process.

6. Consequences of stuck accession

It would be useful to add sociological and psychological aspects of domestic politics, as well as the responsibility of political actors and the media, to the presentation of the stalemate in the accession process of North Macedonia and Serbia. In the focus of domestic politics in both countries is dominated by a negative perception of the accession process, which affects national pride, because the populist ruling parties in both countries are not only very sensitive to alleged threats to national identity, disrespect for history, tradition, culture, the use of double standards, and the constant humiliation of the people and the state, but also fuel them. It seems that highlighting the humiliation of a state that comes from the EU through the accession process is becoming their “trademark”, which historically represents a continuation of the saga of the spirit of humiliation of peoples that has been hovering over the Balkans for centuries. Frevert (2020) points out that the emergence of a national public that closely monitors how its government behaves and reacts on the international stage has led to the fact that “the people” and the media have tended to exaggerate the significance of alleged acts of disrespect, turning them into issues of national existence. At the heart of the politics of humiliation today is the enormous power possessed by the modern media. National honor, or pride, is so jealously guarded precisely because it is so easily offended. As a rule, only those who have power and want to prove it can humiliate. This matrix reflects Bulgaria's actions towards North Macedonia, using power that is not originally its own, but derived from EU membership. Bulgaria has a similar experience of humiliation because for 15 years, despite the positive recommendations of the Commission and the EP, the country suffered vetoing and felt humiliated in the process of joining the Schengen area. From the point of view of EU law, the political and technical rules and conditions that apply in various accession processes within the EU (Schengen, Monetary Union), member states use the right of veto to block the candidate state in

order to protect their own national interests while demonstrating the strength and power that comes from EU membership.

The Western Balkans and its nations abound in historical events from which they draw their own, deeply developed narrative of how each of them was deceived, damaged or humiliated by by neighbors or great powers. Concretely, Serbia brings to the EU accession process a sense of humiliation associated with the NATO bombing in 1999, the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence, the non-fulfillment of the obligations of the Albanian side regarding the formation of the Community of Serbian Municipalities in the north of Kosovo in accordance with the Brussels Agreement, and the perception that international justice after the civil war in the former Yugoslavia is selective and anti-Serbian.

North Macedonia is burdened with humiliation due to disputes with two EU member states, namely with Greece over its name and the current one with Bulgaria over identity, history and language. From the moment the "French proposal" was accepted in 2022, the conditions it contains have ceased to be just a bilateral request by Bulgaria and have become the official position of the EU. From this perspective, Brussels does not see the situation as humiliation, but as a standard, albeit difficult, procedure for harmonizing with the negotiating framework that a candidate must fulfill if he wants membership.

From a psychological perspective, humiliation is essentially an individual, psychological feeling, but political elites consciously translate it into a collective narrative of a "humiliated nation" through media manipulation. The goals of perpetuating this narrative are to avoid personal political responsibility for making difficult and unpopular decisions and to shift the blame onto the international community, in this case the EU, as evidence of a historical conspiracy. Then, to create a collective awareness of the threat behind the failure to solve the real, tangible problems of citizens. Ultimately, this kind of emotional manipulation eliminates the space for rational criticism and produces traitors or someone without honor and national pride. In political theory, nations in which the feeling of humiliation is widespread and long-lasting rarely become stable democracies.

If we concretize the above-mentioned socio-psychological, populist, and instrumentalized emotional aspects of the EU accession stalemate, we get a clear picture of the mood and consequences of the behavior of the ruling political groups in North Macedonia and Serbia. The current wandering and seeking guarantees to avoid blockages on the road to the EU by North Macedonia is not only an oversight and failure to accept the reality of the procedures and the accession process, but also resembles an impossible mission and continued humiliation. Namely, to every insistence on guarantees against future blocking of accession negotiations in the last two years, the answer is the same: "accept the negotiating framework that has already been agreed and is an international, i.e. an obligation towards the EU, and then we will talk". We presented this in the previous title with the documents from the EU institutions and the latest statement by the President of the European Council Antonio

Costa. It is symptomatic that in the previous stages of enlargement, no country has received such guarantees for the simple reason that the member states have the right to demand reasonable and realistic corrections in the framework of the negotiations on certain chapters, although they often try to turn bilateral issues into the Union's position. What Bulgaria succeeded in doing is nothing new if we look at the history of the blockages of the accession negotiations. On the other hand, the nature of European integration as a political, security, value, reform and technical process allows for diplomatic initiative and exchange of views with a larger number of partners in the negotiations, EU group of states and individual states, to deal more effectively and fight against all possible blockades that will certainly exist in the future on the path to membership. Usually when a member state is left alone without support for its veto, it is a signal that it wants to involve a bilateral issue in the negotiation process and as such that issue is most often resolved by bilateral agreement or through international arbitration. Example: Slovenian blockade of Croatia on the issue of the Pirin Bay.

Therefore, the constitutional amendments and the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia should not further represent a source of emotional frustration but an international legal obligation whose fulfillment will pave the way for full EU membership. Professor Škarić recently emphasized that similar changes on the path to full EU membership were made by Croatia in 2010 by expanding the constitutional protection of nationalities by including an additional 14 minority communities (Škarić, 2026). Voices There are also those from the Bulgarian side who emphasize that no blockades on identity issues, denial of the Macedonian nation and language will contribute to the citizens of North Macedonia becoming Bulgarians. The criticism of their political elite is aimed at the abuse and over-dimensioning of the Macedonian issue, national homogenization and acceptance of far-right populist ideas sought support from citizens in the several electoral processes in Bulgaria. Ditchev (2020) points to the necessity for compromise, encouraging economic cooperation, solving problems in a truly good-neighborly spirit and cooperation, rapprochement between the citizens of the two countries and not returning Bulgaria to the whirlpool of history by denying traditions, people and language as natural processes of establishing a nation like the Macedonian and Bulgarian ones.

Heading into the EU accession process from the perspective of the Republic of Serbia has special features. Humiliation coming from the EU is a common word that connects the two countries and the reasons are completely different. Since the end of 2018, Serbia has been looking at EU accession as a path that will never end. The burden of the accession process, which includes deep reforms in the rule of law, strengthening of institutions, clear division of power, media freedom, fair and honest election processes, acceptance of common values, especially the normalization of relations with Kosovo and the insistence on harmonization with the common external and security policy after the Russian aggression against Ukraine is too heavy a burden for one populist and extremely conservative political option that is in power since

2012. Public discourse and rhetoric against the EU led to only about 40% of the citizens who support entry into the EU, the lowest level of support of the citizens in Serbia and in the region at all. The mass public protests from November 2024 against the captured institutions and the captured state with the expressed authoritarian tendencies embodied in the President Aleksandar Vučić, followed by violent incidents and repression, brought sharp and unprecedented polarization and division in society and among citizens. Pro-European politicians, non-governmental organizations, civil society, independents or media outside the government's control have the status of state enemy number 1. These are the reasons why Serbia is falling behind in the accession process and not a single cluster has been opened since 2022. That setback is not explicitly noted in the annual reports of the European Commission for the progress of Serbia, which is not impossible to happen in the future and that the negotiations with the EU should be formally terminated. It seems that the announced elections in October 2026 will be a litmus test for the future of Serbia in the process of accession to the EU.

The EU bears no small responsibility in the process of accession and in the situation of the stuck accession of North Macedonia and Serbia. In general, The Western Balkans enlargement process remained only an offer of European perspectives to the countries of the region without content, clear political will and the desire for that process to actually end. Since 2003, the EU has essentially played the role of a firefighter, extinguishing potential conflicts in the region on the one hand, and managing economic development and democratic progress in the countries of the Western Balkans, on the other. Of all its weaknesses, perhaps the greatest is the long insistence on consensus and agreements within the EU Council and the European Council where states rule sovereignly and make decisions exclusively in accordance with their national interests. Changing the voting method and switching to qualified majority voting instead of unanimity using *passerle* without amending the Lisbon Treaty and reaching a consensus on it in the European Council is an issue that has been raised again by 11 member states (Blic 2026). If it finally succeeds in this, and a new approach to the enlargement process is agreed at the end of September 2026 within the Commission and approved by the European Council at the summit in mid-October, there is a possibility that it will become an institutional guarantee for unstuck, unblocking and accelerating the enlargement process in the future.

7. Conclusion

The stalled accession process is what North Macedonia is facing, so it can be said from the moment of obtaining candidate status until today. The name dispute with Greece, which was finally resolved in 2018, produced a new blockade on the part of Bulgaria by contesting and raising tensions in both countries regarding the Bulgarian roots in the identity, history and language of the citizens and people of North Macedonia. Using the power derived from its membership in the EU, Bulgaria

managed to turn this blockade, which is a pure example of a bilateral historical issue, into an EU position that prevents the formal start of negotiations with the EU.

Serbia, on the other hand, has been stuck in the accession process since 2022, since it failed to open a single cluster due to non-compliance with the EU's foreign and security policy and non-introduction of sanctions against Russia after its aggression against Ukraine. Since 2018, Euroscepticism has been gaining momentum, and the need to speed up accession has been replaced by a European path that does not necessarily lead to EU membership.

In both countries, there is a sense of disappointment and humiliation, which manifests itself in the manipulation of emotions and the creation of internal and external enemies, from one's own political opponents and citizens with pro-European views to some member states or the entire EU in order to escape political and any other responsibility. The role of the EU in this impasse is not negligible. The Western Balkans enlargement process remained only an offer of European perspectives for the countries of the region without content, clear political will and desire to actually complete the process. Since 2003, the EU has essentially played the role of a firefighter, extinguishing potential conflicts in the region on the one hand, and managing economic development and democratic progress in the Western Balkan countries on the other. In anticipation of new initiatives of the EU institutions, the enlargement process should finally become clearer, more concrete, faster with a clear political will of the member states to finally complete the process in the near future.

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