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*Public Opinion, Technical
Advancements, and Enlargement
Dynamics in the Western Balkan Six:
A comparative Analysis*

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Table of contents

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. <i>Introduction</i> | 3 |
| 2. <i>State of play of the EU-WB accession negotiations</i> | 4 |
| Albania | 4 |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 6 |
| Kosovo | 7 |
| Montenegro | 8 |
| North Macedonia..... | 10 |
| Serbia | 11 |
| 3. <i>WB public opinion vis-à-vis the EU</i> :..... | 13 |
| The 2025 Balkan Barometer, a descriptive analysis of two EU-related questions:..... | 13 |
| The last 10 years..... | 16 |
| 4. <i>Conclusion and policy recommendations</i> | 18 |

Abstract

Public opinion's support is a crucial factor when it comes to policies' implementation and sustainability. This article analyses public opinion in the Western Balkan (WB) countries towards the European Union (EU). After assessing the state of play of the negotiation process between the EU and the six WB entities through the analysis of the 2025 "Enlargement package", WB public attitude vis-à-vis the EU will be examined synchronically and diachronically, drawing on two questions from the 2025 Balkan Barometer:

- 1) Q17 – "Would you say that your ECONOMY¹ will become a member of the EU?"
- 2) Q15 – "Do you think that EU membership of your ECONOMY would be good, neither good nor bad, or bad?".

Findings reveal an increasing public optimism towards the accession and towards the benefits it would bring to the respondents' countries in 2025.

This latest development is in contrast with the trend of the last years, in which distrust towards the EU was mounting. Credits for this renewed enthusiasm must be given to the narrative set up by the European Commission, about the current window of opportunity for enlargement driven by the geopolitical imperative. Nonetheless, the EU must now deliver on its promises to (gradually) integrate the WB region by balancing the geopolitical necessity with merit-based approach, without allowing for dangerous shortcuts. The EU should also acquire a role of problem solver in the region's complexity, being active in solving disputes, vocal in supporting democracy, and regain the transformative role it used to have.

¹ Interestingly, the Balkan Barometer uses the wording "economy" instead of "state" or "country" to indicate the six entities part of the survey. This is arguably due to the controversy about the status of Kosovo*.

1. *Introduction*

The 2025 Balkan Barometer² shows a surprising surge in enthusiasm about the EU enlargement process in Western Balkan Six (WB6³) public opinion. Indeed, these results arrive after the 2016-2024 decade, in which the European Union (EU) had seemingly lost appeal in the Western Balkans, being this the umpteenth obstacle on the way to enlargement. Besides sluggish advancements in formal negotiations, WB6 public opinion was more and more disenchanted about the feasibility of EU accession and about the benefits that this could bring with it⁴. Is the EU reacquiring the status of desired destination in the eyes of WB6 citizens? And, can the EU deliver on its promises of enlargement – driven by the current “geopolitical imperative” narrative – without compromising the merit-based approach?

The present study has three purposes: 1) To trace the status of the negotiations between the EU and WB countries, in the framework of the EU’s enlargement process. 2) To provide an overview of WB public opinion vis-à-vis the EU today and over the last 10 years. 3) To propose recommendations for a fair advancement of the process.

The significance of this research lies in the assumption that, if the European Union intends to preserve the credibility and feasibility of its enlargement policy, public opinion in the candidate countries must be treated as a central variable rather than a secondary concern. To this end, the EU must propose itself as the best alternative, delivering tangible advantages and credible perspectives to WB6 citizens, to avoid their gaze turning Eastwards.

The relevance of this analysis lies in the scarce presence of studies on WB6 public opinion, in general, and to the originality of its approach. The study contributes to the existing literature by linking technical progress in the enlargement process with public attitudes, assessing whether institutional advancements are effectively translated into societal support.

In the first section, the paper will take stock of the status of the negotiations between the EU and the WB6. In doing this, it will summarize the European Commission’s (hereinafter “the Commission”) opinions written in the so-called “EU enlargement package”, updated to its latest version (released in November 2025). A country-by-country document analysis will be provided, with focus on the main strengths and issues observed in each country. In the second section, the article will deal with WB6 public opinion vis-à-vis the EU enlargement/accession process: firstly, in a synchronic way, through a data analysis of the latest Balkan Barometer – released by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) in December 2025. Subsequently, the same will be done in a diachronic way, through a time-series analysis of the last 10 years. Two questions will be the focal point of the research: one regards public opinion on accession feasibility, and one concerns the benefits – or the lack of thereof – that the candidate country would receive in case of accession. In the third and last section, conclusions will be drawn and recommendations will be put forward.

² The Balkan Barometer is a yearly “survey of public opinion and business sentiments in six Western Balkan economies, commissioned by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)”. Data for this year’s version have been collected in June 2025: <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/>.

³ With this acronym, we will refer to the following six entities: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

⁴ Filippo Marinoni, ‘EU Enlargement and Public Opinion in the Western Balkans: How to Counter a Trend of Increasing Distrust’, *REUNIR*, 2025, <https://reunir-horizon.eu/eu-enlargement-and-public-opinion-in-the-western-balkans-how-to-counter-a-trend-of-increasing-distrust/>.

2. State of play of the EU-WB accession negotiations

Every year, the Commission releases country reports on the status of the negotiations between the EU and the candidate countries. This set of reports is named “EU enlargement package”⁵. The Commission evaluates each of the 33 chapters⁶ of the Acquis, that must be opened, fulfilled, and closed by each candidate country in order to be granted the full membership. The assessments are accompanied by recommendations and guidance on the reform priorities. Overall, in the 2025 report there can be identified clear frontrunners (Montenegro and, to some extent, Albania) and laggards (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia)⁷.

The country analysis that follows is carried out in alphabetical order.

Albania

as of December 2025

Candidate status: granted in October 2014

Chapters opened: 33 out of 33

Chapters closed: 0

Main strengths: foreign policy, political commitment

Main issues: corruption, media freedom, minorities protection, labour market

The 2025 enlargement package on Albania⁸ underlines the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths:

- **Alignment to the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP):** “Albania maintained its record of full alignment with the EU’s common foreign and security policy, aligning with the EU position [sending] a strong signal of its strategic choice of EU accession and of its role as a reliable partner. (p. 3).
- **Political commitment to EU integration,** “[t]he government continued to show its commitment to EU integration” (p. 4).

Weaknesses:

- **Role of the Parliament in general and its oversight over the government:** “Political polarisation, lack of genuine political dialogue and clashes between the ruling majority and parts of the opposition continued to affect Parliament’s activity. [...] Parliament is also hampered by limited oversight over the executive” (p. 4).

⁵ EU enlargement package 2025: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/strategy-and-reports_en.

⁶ In the case of Serbia and Kosovo, the chapters are 34, as it is included one specific chapter on the normalization of the relationship between the two.

⁷ Raffaella Coletti and Filippo Marinoni, ‘Il peso del “fattore Russia” sull’allargamento UE’, *Economia, Il Sole 24 ORE*, 13 November 2025, <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/il-peso-fattore-russia-sull-allargamento-ue-AHNDcAiD>.

⁸ European Commission, *Albania Report 2025* (2025), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2025_en.

- **Corruption**, despite “tangible progress towards a solid track record in the fight against corruption, [...] corruption remained widespread across vulnerable sectors, affecting both the public and private spheres. The institutional framework for prevention of corruption continued to have a limited impact and coordination with law enforcement remained weak” (p. 6).
- **Media freedom**: “Albania made no progress in aligning the legislative framework with the EU acquis and European standards. This includes no progress to address major challenges hampering media independence”. “[V]erbal and physical attacks, smear campaigns and strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) targeting journalists continued.” (p. 36).
- **Brain-drain and the labour market**, despite some positive news: “[t]he labour market registered positive developments, but it faces structural issues. [...] Emigration, especially of skilled workers, exacerbates labour shortages in key sectors, contributing to a brain drain” (p. 52-53).
- **Non-discrimination and gender equality**: “[w]omen living in rural and remote areas, Roma⁹ and Egyptian women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) persons continue to face multiple forms of discrimination” (p. 39).

Overall, Albania’s abrupt advancement in the negotiations, which took place in the last 12 months, appears to be based rather on its leader PM Edi Rama’s charisma and political will of EU integration than on the technical sphere. Despite being very far from meeting the Copenhagen criteria, the Council of the European Union (hereinafter “the Council”) has greenlighted the opening of all 33 chapters¹⁰ between October 2024 and November 2025. Lately, the Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, declared that Albania could even join the EU in 2029¹¹. As this impressive move forward in Albania’s process is not matched with exceptional technical nor democratic advancements¹², it is reasonable to question why this is happening¹³. The answer is likely a quid pro quo between the EU and Albanian PM Rama; the latter is a strong EU ally (and NATO partner) in the region and is used to accommodate EU (Member States’) requests – for instance, the one related to the migration scheme put in place with Italy¹⁴, hailed by the EU as a “model”¹⁵. The former is in turn granting political legitimacy in the eyes of PM Rama’s Albanian constituency, who elected Rama for the fourth consecutive term in May 2025¹⁶.

⁹ In line with the terminology of European institutions, the umbrella term ‘Roma’ is used here to refer to a number of different groups, without denying the specificities of these groups.

¹⁰ The New Union Post, *Albania Succeeded in Opening All EU Negotiating Chapters*, News, 17 November 2025, <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/11/17/albania-open-eu-accession-negotiations/>.

¹¹ EWB, ‘Kos: Montenegro Could Join the EU 2028, Albania in 2029’, *European Western Balkans*, 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/09/02/kos-montenegro-could-join-the-eu-2028-albania-in-2029/>.

¹² Wouter Zweers et al., *Albania’s EU Accession Sprint: Balancing Momentum, Reform, and EU Scrutiny* (Clingendael Institute, 2025), <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/albanias-eu-accession-sprint-balancing-momentum-reform-and-eu-scrutiny>.

¹³ Federico Baccini, ‘Adesione UE dell’Albania, oltre gli entusiasmi’, *Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT)*, 2025, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Albania/Adesione-UE-dell-Albania-oltre-gli-entusiasmi-238296>.

¹⁴ Camera dei Deputati, ‘Protocollo Italia-Albania in materia migratoria - Cittadinanza e immigrazione - Politica estera e relazioni internazionali’, Documentazione parlamentare, 2024, <https://temi.camera.it/leg19/provvedimento/protocollo-italia-albania-in-materia-migratoria.html>.

¹⁵ Jennifer Rankin and Angela Giuffrida, ‘Von Der Leyen to Ask EU Leaders to Explore Using “Return Hubs” for Migrants’, World News, *The Guardian*, 15 October 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/oct/15/ursula-von-der-leyen-to-ask-eu-leaders-to-explore-using-return-hubs-for-migrants>.

¹⁶ Le Monde, *Albanian PM Secures Fourth Term after Large Election Win for the Socialist Party*, 14 May 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/05/14/albania-pm-secures-fourth-term-after-large-election-win-for-the-socialist-party-officials-6741254_4.html.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

as of December 2025

Candidate status: granted in December 2022

Chapters opened: 0 out of 33

Chapters closed: 0

Main strengths: foreign policy, migration management

Main issues: discriminatory constitutional system, judiciary system, corruption

The 2025 enlargement package on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)¹⁷ underlines the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths:

- **Alignment to the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP)**: Bosnia and Herzegovina has maintained full alignment with the EU common foreign and security policy, signalling its clear commitment to the EU path.” (p. 90).
- **Migration management**: “[m]igration management continues to improve [...] Reception capacities are sufficient. Readmission agreements and implementing protocols continue to be implemented” (p. 20).

Weaknesses:

- **Democracy** (in Republika Srpska in particular): “[t]he functioning of democratic institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina is challenged by the persistent discriminatory elements in the constitutional structure, by the constant misuse of entity vetoes for political purposes (leading to inaction and delays in the work of the executive and Parliament), as well as by the increasing intensity of systematic attacks on the legal and constitutional order by the Republika Srpska entity” (p. 21).
- **Fundamental rights and electoral and constitutional system**: “[t]he country needs to urgently adopt constitutional and electoral reforms to ensure that all citizens are able to effectively exercise their political rights, notably bring the country’s Constitution into line with the Sejdić-Finci case law of the European Court of Human Rights” (p. 6).
- **Judiciary system**: “[t]he poor functioning of the judicial system continued to undermine citizens’ rights and the fight against corruption” (p. 5).
- **Corruption management**: “the track record on fighting corruption remains weak, with very few convictions, in particular in high-level cases. Rules on conflicts of interest, verification of asset declarations and protection of whistle-blowers either do not exist or continue not to be enforced effectively across the country” (p. 6).
- **Media freedom**: “Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to experience deep stagnation in media freedom, with worrying signs of deterioration” (p. 7).

Overall, Bosnia and Herzegovina appears very distant from a potential integration into the EU. Its dysfunctional sectarian political system created by the 1995 Dayton agreement is the main cause for

¹⁷ European Commission, *Bosnia and Herzegovina Report 2025* (2025), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2025_en.

the stalemate in adopting reforms. The dispute between the two entities composing BiH has reached one (if not the) highest peak between February and August 2025. The President of Republika Srpska¹⁸, Milorad Dodik, has been sentenced to one year of prison (which has been avoided thanks to the payment of a fine) and banned for six years from public offices. Dodik did not recognize the sentence and passed secessionist laws¹⁹. Further instability is expected, following the election of the new leader Siniša Keran in November 2025 with a tiny majority²⁰, while the EU accession journey will likely continue to be stuck.

Despite being quite problematic, the EU sees the country as a crucial partner in its controversial migration policy along the Balkan route. In June 2025, the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina struck an agreement²¹ for the deployment of FRONTEX “standing corps” along the borders with the EU, for “preventing irregular border crossings and strengthening the security of the region”²². This is in line with the role that BiH has had up to now in its relationship with the EU, the last barriers before the EU, from where the persons on the move try their “game” that consists of entering Croatia²³.

Kosovo*

as of December 2025

Candidate status: still a “potential candidate” since December 2022

Chapters opened: 0 out of 34

Chapters closed: 0

Main strengths: foreign policy (mainly due to condemnation of Russia’s aggression of Ukraine).

Main issues: normalisation with Serbia, non-recognition by 5 EUMS, judiciary system, inequalities

The 2025 enlargement package on Kosovo*²⁴ underlines the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths:

- **Alignment to the EU vision on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine**: “The EU has repeatedly welcomed Kosovo’s continued condemnation of Russia’s unjustified and unprovoked military

¹⁸ Republika Srpska (RS) is one of the two entities that form Bosnia and Herzegovina. RS is a close ally of Putin’s Russia and Vučić’s Serbia. As such, it is anti-EU and secessionist.

¹⁹ Azem Kurtic, ‘Bosnia’s Constitutional Court Scraps Serb Entity’s Disputed Laws’, *Balkan Insight*, 29 May 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/05/29/bosnias-constitutional-court-scraps-serb-entitys-disputed-laws/>; Al Jazeera, *Separatist Bosnian Serb Leader Dodik Removed from Office*, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/6/separatist-bosnian-serb-leader-dodik-sacked-from-office-by-bosnia-officials>.

²⁰ Azem Kurtic, ‘Bosnian Serb Presidential Poll Win for Dodik’s Ally Disputed by Opposition’, *Balkan Insight*, 24 November 2025, <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/11/24/bosnian-serb-presidential-poll-win-for-dodiks-ally-disputed-by-opposition/>.

²¹ European Commission, ‘Status Agreement with Bosnia and Herzegovina’, 11 June 2025, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/status-agreement-bosnia-and-herzegovina_en.

²² Full declaration available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-strengthens-cooperation-migration-and-border-management-bosnia-and-herzegovina-2025-06-11_en

²³ Claudio Minca and Jessica Collins, ‘The Game: Or, “the Making of Migration” along the Balkan Route’, *Political Geography* 91 (November 2021): 102490, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102490>.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

²⁴ European Commission, *Kosovo Report 2025* (2025), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2025_en.

aggression against Ukraine and its enforcement of restrictive measures against Russia and Belarus.” (p. 3).

Weaknesses:

- **Lack of implementation of the normalisation process with Serbia:** [d]uring the reporting period, the situation in the north of Kosovo remained calm but fragile. [...] Kosovo repeatedly conducted activities contrary to its obligations under the Dialogue” agreements (p. 63).
- **Effective independence of the judiciary and management of corruption cases:** “The efficiency of the justice system is limited” (p. 28) [...] “Delays in case resolution, especially in high-profile corruption cases, remain a major issue. Frequent and sometimes unjustified adjournments and deficient case management contribute to high numbers of unproductive hearings and retrials” (p. 29).
- **Public health and health inequalities:** “the quality of healthcare remains a concern. [...] Despite improvements, life expectancy at birth remains lower than the EU average. Child mortality declined but remains the highest in the region and significantly higher than the EU average” (p.72). Moreover, “[h]ealth inequalities continue to remain a serious concern. The financial burden has been particularly difficult for the vulnerable and poor segments of society including people with chronic conditions” (p.73).

Kosovo’s progress in negotiations remains limited and several obstacles persist. Firstly, the lack of improvement in the normalisation process with Serbia, which has not sufficiently evolved after the promising Ohrid Agreement (signed in March 2023). The restrictive measures imposed by the EU on Kosovo for the lack of compliance to the Agreement – imposed in June 2023 – have been only partially lifted starting from May 2025, and they still hinder investments²⁵. New elections, held in February 2025 saw the incumbent PM Kurti’s party – Vetëvendosje! – obtaining only a tight majority, resulting in a political deadlock of several months, which paralysed the process of reforms. Eventually, the lack of complete international recognition seems the paramount obstacle for Kosovo’s integration; five EU member states and five candidate countries²⁶ – ahead of Kosovo in the negotiations – do not recognize Kosovo’s sovereignty²⁷. For the time being, Kosovo remains only a “potential candidate”.

Montenegro

as of December 2025

Candidate status: since December 2010

Chapters opened: 33 out of 33

Chapters closed: 12

Main strengths: political commitment to EU integration, economy, foreign policy

²⁵ Federico Baccini and Arian Lumezi, ‘Frozen Funds, Frozen Progress: The Impact of the EU’s Measures against Kosovo’, World Politics, *Eunews*, 10 July 2025, <https://www.eunews.it/en/2025/07/10/frozen-funds-frozen-progress-the-impact-of-the-eus-measures-against-kosovo/>.

²⁶ Among the EU member states: Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. Among the candidate countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine.

²⁷ Ioannis Armakolas and James Ker-Lindsay, eds, *The Politics of Recognition and Engagement: EU Member State Relations with Kosovo* (Springer International Publishing, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17945-8>.

Main issues: independence of the Constitutional Court, women discrimination, discrimination of vulnerable groups

The 2025 enlargement package on Montenegro²⁸ underlines the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths:

- There are several domains in which the Commission positively evaluates Montenegro readiness to join the EU, chiefly in Cluster 3 “**Competitiveness & inclusive growth**” and Cluster 2 “**Internal market**”.

Weaknesses:

- **Doubts on Constitutional Court’s independence:** “Until mid-December 2024, Parliament functioned relatively regularly. In December, the Parliament adopted the decision to unilaterally terminate the mandate of a Constitutional Court judge for retirement. [...] These developments raised strong concerns about the respect of the independence of the Constitutional Court and the principle of separation of powers enshrined in the Constitution” (p. 23).
- **Women discrimination:** “Women continue to face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and stigmatisation is prevalent in Montenegrin society. [...] Gender-based violence is pervasive, affecting women across different spheres of life. Societal attitudes remain troubling: one third of citizens believe women fabricate claims of psychological abuse for attention. Furthermore, the lack of accountability for perpetrators is an issue: only 10% of convictions for violence result in prison sentences” (p. 46 - 47). “The inclusion of women in political life remains low and is undermined by insufficient state and public efforts to overcome gender stereotypes” (p. 23).
- **Discrimination towards minorities:** “[t]he most vulnerable groups in society (including Roma and Egyptians, people with disabilities, LGBTIQ people) continued to be subjected to discrimination, hate speech and hate crime” (p. 7).

Overall, Montenegro must be considered by far the frontrunner in the European journey among the candidate countries from the WB. In the last years, advancements have been made, both at technical level and in the diplomatic sphere. Miloiko Spajić and his entourage are often in Brussels, advocating for a rapid adhesion. Commissioner Marta Kos foresees Montenegro’s accession by the end of the next Commission, perhaps even in 2028²⁹. Montenegro closed 9 chapters between December 2024 and December 2025, being the only candidate country to fulfil this objective during the last year³⁰. Among the critical notes which could hinder or slow down its inclusion, it is worth noting the potential controversy with Croatia about a resolution passed by Montenegrin government, which recognises

²⁸ European Commission, *Montenegro Report 2025* (2025), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/montenegro-report-2025_en.

²⁹ EWB, ‘Kos: Montenegro Could Join the EU 2028, Albania in 2029’.

³⁰ The New Union Post, ‘Montenegro Closes 5 More Chapters, but Is Still Not Halfway’, Montenegro, *The New Union Post*, 16 December 2025, <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/12/16/montenegro-accession-negotiations-2025/>.

Jasenovac as a concentration camp³¹ and the doubts about the independence of the judiciary system, emerged in 2025³².

North Macedonia

as of December 2025

Candidate status: granted in December 2005

Chapters opened: 0 out of 33

Chapters closed: 0

Main strengths: functioning market economy, foreign policy

Main issues: corruption, constitutional changes, bilateral disputes (with Bulgaria and Greece)

The 2025 enlargement package on North Macedonia³³ underlines the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths:

- **Development of a functioning market economy**: North Macedonia “is at a good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy. Real GDP growth accelerated in 2024, driven by private consumption and public investment” (p. 8).
- **Alignment to the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)**: “North Macedonia maintained its full alignment with the EU’s common foreign and security policy, including on Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, sending a strong signal of its strategic choice of EU accession and showing itself to be a reliable partner” (p. 3).

Weaknesses:

- **Need for constitutional changes to include Bulgarians as a recognised people**: “No attempts were made to adopt the relevant constitutional changes referred to in the Council Conclusions of 18 July 2022, which the country committed to launch and achieve, with a view to ensuring that the Constitution covers citizens who live within the borders of the State and who are part of other peoples, such as Bulgarians” (p. 4).
- **Corruption**: “[c]orruption remains prevalent in many areas and is an issue of serious concern” (p. 5).
- **Labour market**: “[t]he labour market situation improved, but structural problems persist, including low participation rates, substantial emigration and a large gender gap” (p. 8).

³¹ Eddy Wax and Seb Starcevic, ‘Holocaust Vote Throws Wrench in Montenegro’s EU Bid’, *POLITICO*, 1 July 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/holocaust-vote-montenegro-eu-accession-world-war-2-death-camp-jasenovac-croatia-milojko-spajic/>.

³² Sofija Popović, ‘Political Turmoil over Constitutional Court Dispute: A Challenge to the Montenegrin EU Reform Path?’, *European Western Balkans*, 3 April 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/04/03/political-turmoil-over-constitutional-court-dispute-a-challenge-to-the-montenegrin-eu-reform-path/>.

³³ European Commission, *North Macedonia Report 2025* (2025), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-macedonia-report-2025_en.

Overall, North Macedonia seems very far from accession. Despite being the first among the six WB countries to be granted the candidate status (20 years ago), in September 2024, the country's accession path was decoupled from Albania's one: the former has been stopped, whilst the latter went through³⁴.

The main issue concerns the relationship with neighbouring countries, namely with Greece (theoretically settled with the 2018 Prespa Agreement) and with Bulgaria (ongoing). Bulgaria pushes for the constitutional changes to include Bulgarians as a recognised minority. Furthermore, possible resurgences of the controversy with Greece about the name exist. North Macedonian President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova and PM Hristijan Mickoski – both elected in spring 2024 and part of the nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE – have preferred the use of the name “Macedonia” in public appearances, sparking Greek indignation³⁵. The EU, from its side, does not manage to mitigate interstate and interethnic tensions, as Fouéré (2024) affirms³⁶, by guaranteeing reciprocity and dialogue between the parties. Furthermore, the need for unanimity in the crucial steps of accession and the lack of an alternative forum to solve the disputes arising between EUMS and candidate countries pose candidate countries in a position of deep inferiority³⁷. All in all, a disillusioned North Macedonia vis-à-vis the EU could mean its rapprochement with other international partners, such as Russia, China, and Turkey³⁸.

Serbia

as of December 2025

Candidate status: since 2012

Chapters opened: 22 out of 34

Chapters closed: 2

Main strengths: market economy, migration management

Main issues: democracy and rule of law, political commitment, foreign policy, media freedom, normalisation with Kosovo, protest management

³⁴ Marija Stojanović, ‘After Decoupling from Tirana, Skopje Is Left in a Limbo and Looking into Foreign Policy Reorientation’, *European Western Balkans*, 30 September 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/09/30/after-decoupling-from-tirana-skopje-is-left-in-a-limbo-and-looking-into-foreign-policy-reorientation/>.

³⁵ Konstantin Testorides, ‘North Macedonia’s New President Reignites a Spat with Greece at Her Inauguration Ceremony’, World News, *AP News*, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/president-north-macedonia-greece-inauguration-e1bdfa1fb9021f91023b0250ae8b7541>; Newsroom, ‘Mickoski: The New Government Will Respect the Prespa Agreement, but I Will Call My Country “Macedonia”’, *ProtoThema English*, 5 June 2024, <https://en.protothema.gr/2024/06/05/mickoski-the-new-government-will-respect-the-prespa-agreement-but-i-will-call-my-country-macedonia/>.

³⁶ Erwan Fouéré, ‘Criticism of New President Highlights EU’s Double Standards on North Macedonia’, *Balkan Insight*, 22 May 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/22/criticism-of-new-president-highlights-eus-double-standards-on-north-macedonia/>.

³⁷ Erwan Fouéré, *EU Enlargement and the Resolution of Bilateral Disputes in the Western Balkans*, 10 July 2023, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/eu-enlargement-and-the-resolution-of-bilateral-disputes-in-the-western-balkans/>.

³⁸ Angelica Vascotto, ‘External Influences in the Western Balkans: Where Are We At?’, *Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, 2024, <https://feprs-europe.eu/publication/external-influences-in-the-western-balkans-where-are-we-at/>.

The 2025 enlargement package on Serbia³⁹ underlines the following strengths and weaknesses:

Strengths:

- **Market economy:** “Serbia has a good level of preparation and has made limited progress in developing a functioning market economy” (p. 8).
- **Migration management:** “The management of legal and irregular migration is broadly satisfactory” (p. 53).

Weaknesses:

- **Democratic standards** (elections, Parliament’s action, and civil society): “Parliament’s effectiveness and oversight function remain hampered by the low frequency of sessions and the lack of genuine political debate”. “Tangible improvements and further reforms are needed in the conduct of elections”. “Civil society organisations (CSOs) in Serbia operate in an increasingly difficult environment. Since the start of the protests, CSOs advocating for the rule of law have faced intensified verbal attacks and smear campaigns, including by high-level officials. Complaints were filed against the use of spyware targeting human rights defenders and journalists” (p. 4).
- **Fundamental rights, freedom of expression, and management of the protests:** “While freedom of assembly was generally ensured and protests allowed to take place, the safety of participants was not always guaranteed, and several violent incidents against demonstrators and journalists occurred, with reported cases of excessive use of force by the police. [...] The European Court of Human Rights issued an interim measure on the alleged use by the authorities of a sonic weapon for crowd control at demonstrations in Belgrade. [...] [T]here was backsliding during the reporting period as the environment for journalists, media professionals and outlets seriously worsened. Recurrent statements by high-level officials on the work of journalists have a chilling effect on the freedom of expression” (p. 6-7).
- **Anti-EU narrative:** “[t]here is an anti-EU narrative evident not only in Serbian media outlets but also used by political office holders, including at highest levels” (p. 3).
- **Foreign policy and rapprochement with Russia and China:** “[h]igh-level and frequent bilateral contacts with Russia intensified, including attendance at the 9 May Russian military parade, combined with recurrent anti-Western narratives, raising further questions about Serbia’s strategic direction. Serbia’s Free Trade Agreement with China entered into force on 1 July 2024, posing a strategic concern (p. 20).
- **Normalisation with Kosovo:** “Serbia repeatedly conducted activities contrary to its obligations under the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation by lobbying against Kosovo’s membership in international organisations. [...] The withdrawal of Kosovo Serbs from Kosovo institutions in November 2022 and the boycott of local elections in the north of Kosovo in April 2023 violate Serbia’s Dialogue obligations and they constitute severe backsliding in Serbia’s compliance with the April 2013 “First agreement of principles governing the normalisation of relations” and direct violation of the Justice Agreement of 2015” (p. 72).

Overall, Serbia appears increasingly distant from an inclusion into the EU. Several structural and worsening issues have been identified by the Commission and there is no reason to think that they will improve soon, unless a radical political change happens. The last 13 months have been characterized by mass protests, started in November 2024, following the fall of the canopy at the train station in Novi Sad, which resulted in 15 casualties. University students gathered a huge part of the population behind them and took the streets to ask for democracy, transparency, and the end of Vučić’s

³⁹ European Commission, *Serbia Report 2025* (2025), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2025_en.

regime⁴⁰. The response from the government has been violent, sometimes brutal. The EU, from its part, did not vocally back students' support and preferred to remain ambiguous⁴¹. As a matter of fact, Vučić's Serbia remains a strategic partner of the EU: they have struck an important, controversial⁴², and lately paused⁴³ deal on lithium supply in summer 2024. Concerning the management of migrants along the Balkan route, then, Serbia is an important EU partner in which FRONTEX operations take place, following the ratification of the agreement in April 2025. Through this strategic positioning with the EU, Serbia can keep on its balancing between East and West in foreign policy⁴⁴.

3. WB public opinion vis-à-vis the EU:

Beyond technical progress and political commitment by both the EU and candidate countries' governments, public opinion remains a crucial actor to investigate in the framework of EU enlargement. The lack of support from WB public opinion to the EU accession process would be the umpteenth obstacle to the realisation of EU enlargement process. Public opinion's support for specific policies is crucial when aiming for their sustainable implementation⁴⁵. Nonetheless, there is scarce literature about WB public opinion towards the EU⁴⁶.

A previous study on the same topic revealed a quite dark scenario for the EU in WB citizens' eyes, following the release of the 2024 Balkan Barometer, denoting an increasing accession pessimism and scepticism about benefits of EU adhesion⁴⁷. However, the scenario portraited by the 2025 version seems more encouraging, and will be analysed in the following paragraph.

The 2025 Balkan Barometer, a descriptive analysis of two EU-related questions:

The present paragraph focuses on to two questions from the 2025 Balkan Barometer annual survey:

- 1) Q17 – Would you say that your ECONOMY will become a member of the EU? (fig. 1)

⁴⁰ Strahinja Subotić, 'Serbia's Civic Awakening: The 2024-2025 Student Protests in Focus', *Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, n.d., accessed 11 September 2025, <https://feeps-europe.eu/publication/serbias-civic-awakening-the-2024-2025-student-protests-in-focus/>.

⁴¹ Antigona Imeri, 'The EU's Strategic Compromises Are Blinding It to the Ongoing Fight for Democracy in Serbia', *CEPS*, 18 July 2025, <https://www.ceps.eu/the-eus-strategic-compromises-are-blinding-it-to-the-ongoing-fight-for-democracy-in-serbia/>.

⁴² Una Hajdari, 'Berlin Inks Lithium Deal with Belgrade despite Environmental Concerns', *POLITICO*, 19 July 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/olaf-scholz-maros-sefcovic-lithium-deal-serbia-environmental-concerns/>.

⁴³ Jelisaveta Perišić, 'Rio Tinto Halts Lithium Mining Project Jadar in Serbia', *Balkan Green Energy News*, 13 November 2025, <https://balkangreenenergynews.com/rio-tinto-halts-lithium-mining-project-jadar-in-serbia/>.

⁴⁴ Dejan Guzina, 'Serbia after Yugoslavia: Caught between Geopolitics and Liberal Promises', *Geopolitics* 28, no. 4 (2023): 1589–610, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2022.2078706>.

⁴⁵ Sara B. Hobolt and Catherine E. de Vries, 'Public Support for European Integration', *Annual Review of Political Science* 19, no. Volume 19, 2016 (2016): 413–32, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042214-044157>; Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, 'A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus', *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 1 (2009): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000409>.

⁴⁶ Roberto Belloni, 'The European Union Blowback? Euroscepticism and Its Consequences in the Western Balkans', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 10, no. 4 (2016): 530–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2016.1211387>; Ivan Damjanovski et al., 'Predictors of Euroscepticism in Six Western Balkan Countries', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Routledge, 2 April 2020, world, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683857.2020.1744091>.

⁴⁷ Marinoni, 'EU Enlargement and Public Opinion in the Western Balkans: How to Counter a Trend of Increasing Distrust'.

2) Q15 – Do you think that EU membership of your ECONOMY would be good, neither good nor bad, or bad? (fig. 2)

In other terms, these questions could be reframed as: is EU enlargement still a credible process? And is the EU still a desirable destination?

The results show that more than half of WB citizens believe in a rapid accession; 51% said that their country will join the EU before 2035. On the other hand, 2/3 of WB citizens believe in EU accession bringing benefits for their respective country. However, these aggregate results must be nuanced for each of the six entities composing the WB.

The most optimistic about a rapid accession (by 2035) are the Albanians (70%), the Kosovars (66%), and the Montenegrins (63%). For Albania and Montenegro, this public attitude is perfectly in line with the reiterated statements of the new Commissioner for the Enlargement Marta Kos, about the fact that the Union will expand by the end of Von der Leyen's II mandate⁴⁸ and to the official declaration of the EU about the fact that the two countries are “frontrunners”⁴⁹. Kosovars’ accession optimism is much more difficult to explain given the current political situation; its process of integration is hindered by several factors. For instance, the necessity of normalising the relations with Serbia (Chapter 35 of both countries’ negotiation process) and the issue of the international recognition (*v. supra*). Nonetheless, Krasniqi (2013) maintains that this firm pro-EU stance is due to Kosovo’s self-conception as a Euro-Atlantic partner and to the role of the Kosovar diaspora as a bridge, as it is chiefly established in Western countries⁵⁰.

On the other side of the spectrum, Serbians are the most accession pessimistic – with 1/3 of the respondents believing it will never happen – and the most sceptical about benefits deriving from the EU integration – 19% believes it would be detrimental for the country. This does not come as a surprise, as Serbian outlets, which are in the hand of President Vučić, regularly spread anti-EU propaganda. The whole political system is in the hands of the President’s Progressive Party (SNS), which have pursued a strategy of “state capture”, not least accommodated by the EU conditionality, according to Richter and Wunsch (2020)⁵¹. Furthermore, the lack of a vocal support for the protesters who took the streets following the tragedy of Novi Sad, in the name of safeguarding the strategic partnership with Vučić, has not conveyed to the people the idea of a supportive and reliable EU. There has been an improvement from last year’s Barometer, though this could have been much higher with a vocal and supportive EU.

North Macedonians and Bosnians are quite pessimistic about their countries’ possibility of accession, with 1/4 and 1/5 believing it will never happen, respectively. However, a significant majority believes that accession would be beneficial for their countries. This demonstrates that the EU project is still a desired objective for the citizens, who however are disillusioned by the “fatigue”⁵² and the “resistance”⁵³ to the enlargement.

⁴⁸ EWB, ‘Kos: Montenegro Could Join the EU 2028, Albania in 2029’.

⁴⁹ ANSA, ‘Kos: “Albania e Montenegro i frontrunner nel processo di adesione”’, ANSA, 14 January 2025, https://www.ansa.it/europa/notizie/rubriche/altrenews/2025/01/14/kos-albania-e-montenegro-i-frontrunner-nel-processo-di-adesione_9db9aba2-aa8b-433b-a417-e92cefc2970e.html.

⁵⁰ Gëzim Krasniqi, ‘Pro-EU, No Matter What? European Union (Mis)Perceptions in Kosovo’, in *Integrating the Western Balkans into the EU: Overcoming Mutual Misperceptions*, ed. Milica Uvalić (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32205-1_15.

⁵¹ Solveig Richter and Natasha Wunsch, ‘Money, Power, Glory: The Linkages between EU Conditionality and State Capture in the Western Balkans’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 1 (2020): 41–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1578815>.

⁵² John O’Brennan, “On the Slow Train to Nowhere?” The European Union, “Enlargement Fatigue” and the Western Balkans’, *European Foreign Affairs Review* 19, no. 2 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2014011>.

⁵³ Spyros Economides, ‘From Fatigue to Resistance: EU Enlargement and the Western Balkans’, Monograph no. 17, The Dahrendorf Forum, 20 March 2020, <https://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu/dahrendorf-publications/>.

Would you say that your economy will become a member of the EU? (2025)

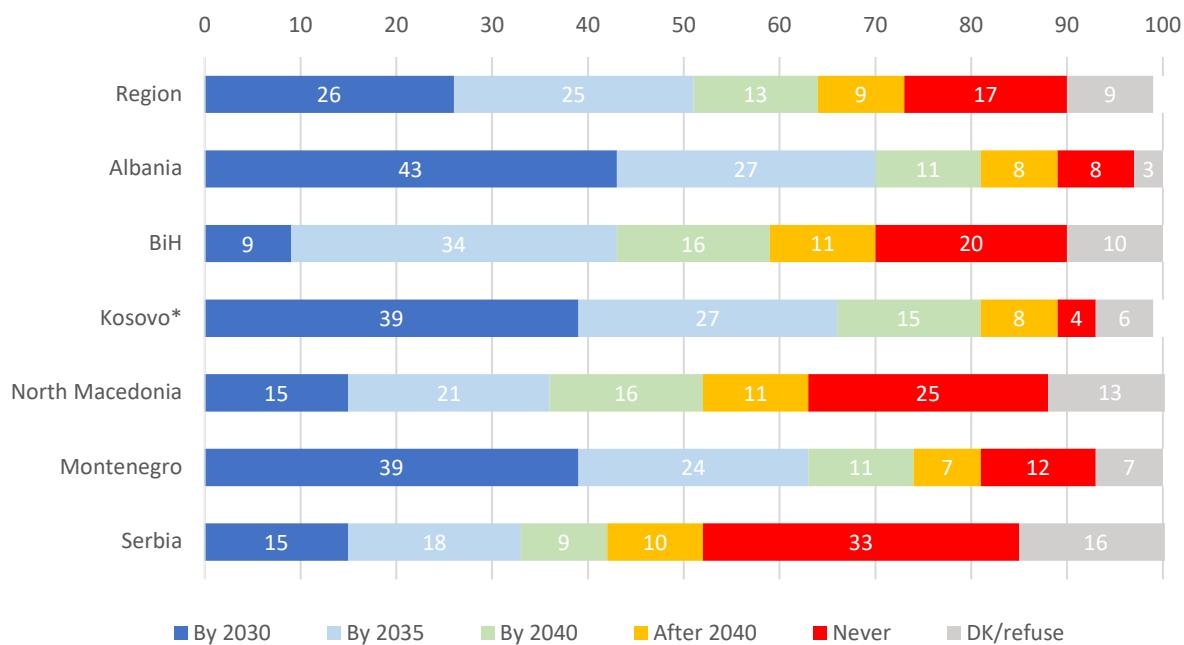


Figure 1 – Q17 of the 2025 Balkan Barometer (RCC, 2025). Elaboration of the author.

Do you think that EU membership of ECONOMY would be good, neither good nor bad, or bad? (2025)

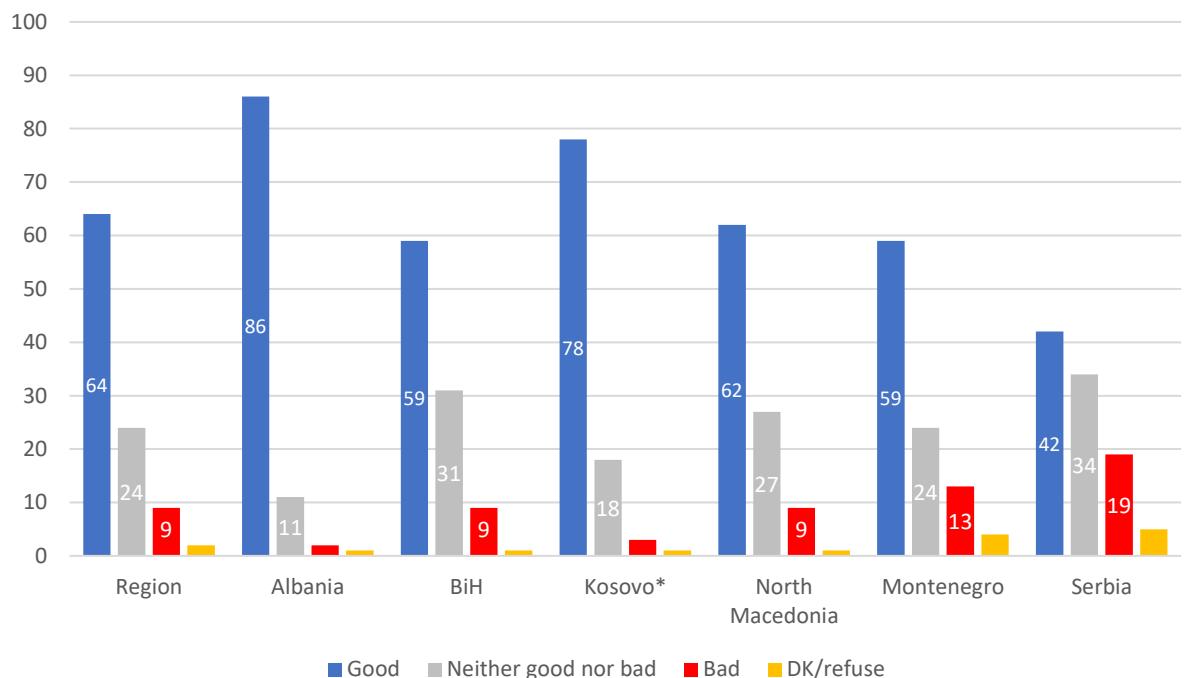


Figure 2 – Q15 of the 2025 Balkan Barometer (RCC, 2025). Elaboration of the author.

The last 10 years

The 2025 Balkan Barometer shows a significant outcome in WB public opinion's trend, marking the most encouraging results since Russia's aggression to Ukraine. It shows a surge in all countries' public belief about the benefits deriving from a potential accession (fig. 4), as well as a regional drop in the accession pessimism (fig. 3). In 2025, in both questions the regional average shows record in the last 10 years. The results of question about accession pessimism (Q17) must be mitigated by the fact that from the 2022 release of the survey a new category of answers has been made available. After 2016, still, the question about potential benefits marks a real spike, with +10% in confidence compared to 2024. This can be explained with the appointment of the new Commissioner for the Enlargement, the Slovenian Marta Kos, who immediately brought "hope for a change in the role of the European Commission in the region"⁵⁴. Contrarily to its predecessor, the Hungarian Olivér Varhelyi, who was seen as a proxy of Orbán's interests in the Commission⁵⁵, Kos seems committed to her tasks vocally and concretely. In November 2025, she organised the first EU Enlargement Forum in Brussels, reuniting all range of stakeholders from the region and the EU, such as politicians, civil society, and youth, debating on the new momentum.

In the last ten years, it is possible to identify some trends. Albanians and Kosovars have been by far the most optimist about accession and its benefits. In these two countries, the EU is seen as the only viable partnership for the future; they are completely aligned in foreign policy and their political commitment seems unwavering. The public support for the EU project does not make exception. However, only Albania made tangible advancements in the negotiations (v. *supra*) and in its political rapprochement with the EU. Among the tangible actions that tie the EU and Albania there are the 2023 controversial Protocol on migration with Italy⁵⁶ – seen a step forward in Albania's accession – and the opening of the third venue of the EU-related university College of Europe in Tirana for the 2024-2025 promotion⁵⁷.

Kosovo*, despite receiving the status of "potential candidate" in December 2022 as a spillover effect of a renewed enthusiasm to enlargement⁵⁸ following unlawful Russia's aggression to Ukraine, made few steps forwards. Nonetheless, among them, it is worth noting the removal of the visa needed by Kosovars to travel in the EU in January 2024 and the recently partial lift sanctions lifting (v. *supra*).

The trio composed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia sees the respective population on the regional average. Bosnians have been quite sceptical their country's potential accession until 2022, when the EU finally granted the country with the candidate status. Concerning North Macedonians, signals of renewed hope (and diminished pessimism) appeared in the aftermath of the 2018 Prespa Agreement with Greece⁵⁹ – that changed the name of the country in

⁵⁴ Luisa Chiodi, *Political Parties in the EU and the Challenges of EU Enlargement*, Policy Brief (Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 2025), 20, <https://feeps-europe.eu/publication/political-parties-in-the-eu-and-the-challenges-of-eu-enlargement/>.

⁵⁵ The New Union Post, 'The EU Enlargement Policy Bids Farewell to Olivér Várhelyi', Politics, *The New Union Post*, 17 September 2024, <https://newunionpost.eu/2024/09/17/eu-enlargement-farewell-varhelyi/>.

⁵⁶ Camera dei Deputati, 'Protocollo Italia-Albania in materia migratoria - Cittadinanza e immigrazione - Politica estera e relazioni internazionali'; Amnesty International, 'The Italy-Albania Agreement on Migration: Pushing Boundaries, Threatening Rights', Amnesty International, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur30/7587/2024/en/>; Sergio Carrera et al., *The 2023 Italy-Albania Protocol on Extraterritorial Migration Management - a Worst Practice in Migration and Asylum Policies* (CEPS, 2023), <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/the-2023-italy-albania-protocol-on-extraterritorial-migration-management/>.

⁵⁷ Beda Romano, 'A University Campus in Tirana to Help Integration', *Il Sole 24 ORE*, 25 October 2025, <https://en.ilsole24ore.com/art/a-tirana-university-campus-help-integration-AHL24sKD>.

⁵⁸ Matteo Bonomi and Irene Rusconi, 'From EU "enlargement fatigue" to "enlargement enthusiasm"?", *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik*, 5 October 2023, <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/from-eu-enlargement-fatigue-to-enlargement-enthusiasm/>.

⁵⁹ Text available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/eidikathemata/agreement.pdf>

its current form – and after 2020 NATO accession. Many of them remain however pessimistic about EU accession. Montenegrins, then, despite their country's good position in the negotiations do not massively believe in the positive consequences of joining the bloc. This can be related to the polarised ethnic division, as the Serb component (some 33% of the population) is sceptical of EU integration.

Serians, despite being – by far and continuatively after 2019 – the most pessimistic about integration and its benefits, registered the most positive result after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EU's presence in the in the country in the last years has been, to say the least, debatable, due to: 1) the "Covid diplomacy" in which the EU lagged behind Russia and China in supporting the country, 2) the 2024 "Lithium agreement"⁶⁰ perceived by many as an exploitation of Serbian resources to the detriment of Serians, and 3) the lack of support to the protesters that took the streets (and never left them) after the Novi Sad tragedy.

Accession pessimism – my country will never join the EU (2016-2025)

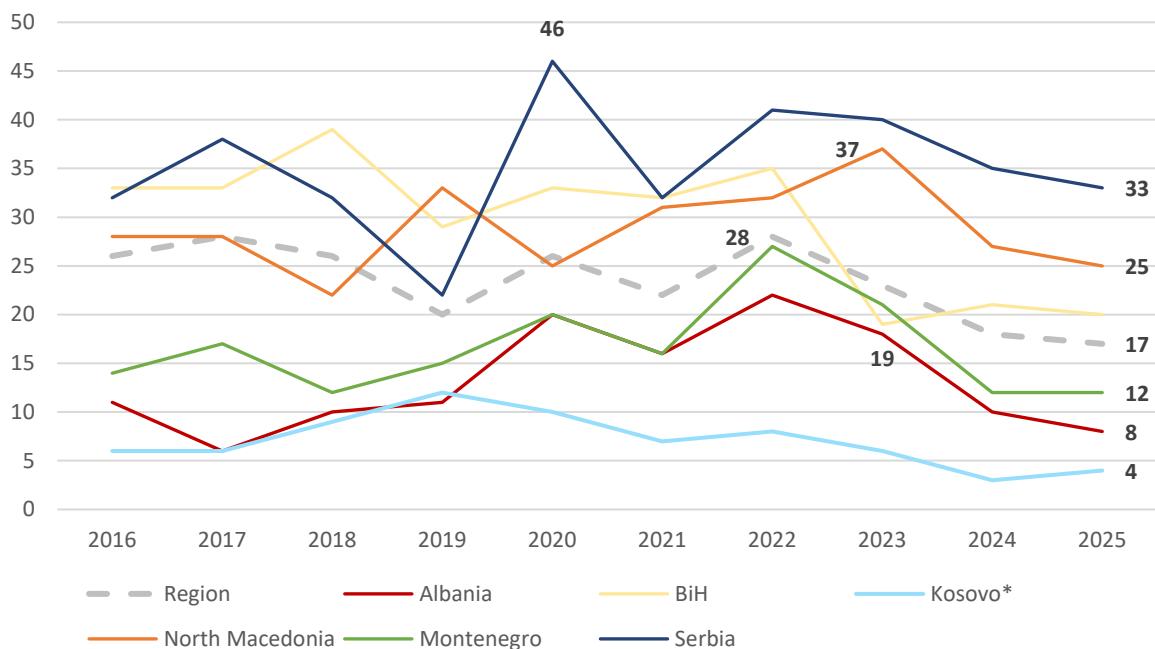


Figure 3 – Share of respondents who answered "Never" to the question "Would you say that your ECONOMY will become a member of the EU" in the last ten years (RCC, 2016-2025). Elaboration of the author

⁶⁰ Text available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_3922

Confidence about the benefits of a potential EU integration (2016 - 2025)

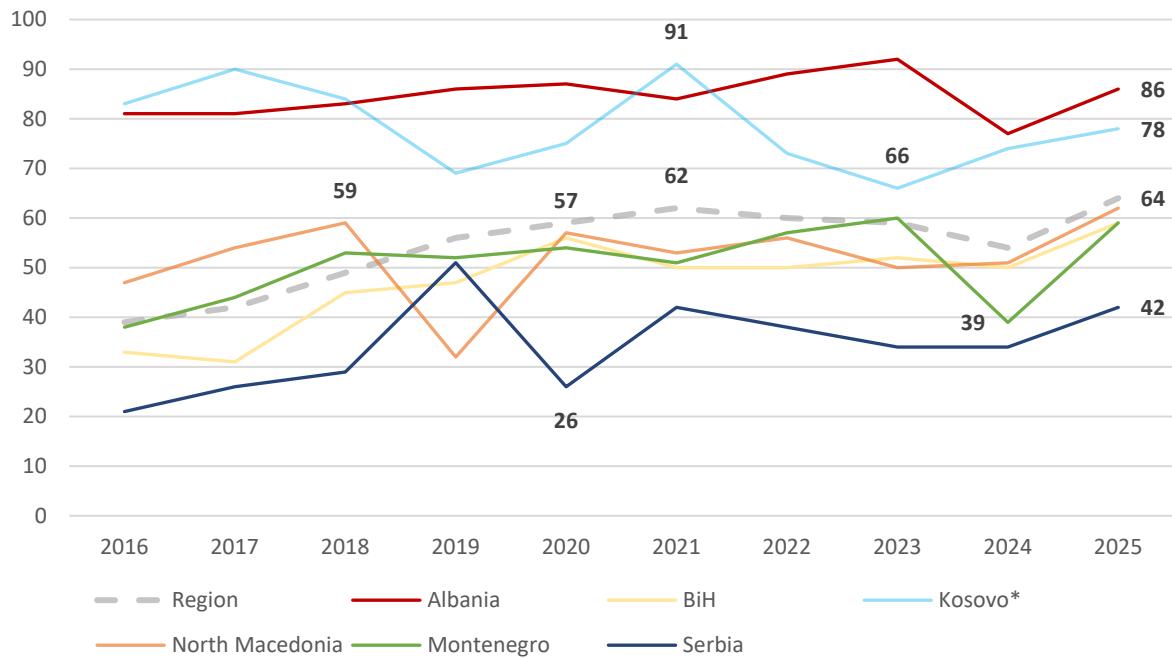


Figure 4 – Share of respondents who answered “Good” to the question “Do you think that EU membership of your ECONOMY would be good, neither good nor bad, or bad?” in the last ten years (RCC, 2016-2025). Elaboration of the author.

4. Conclusion and policy recommendations

With the 2025 Balkan Barometer’s results we assist to a renewed accession optimism and enthusiasm about benefits deriving from a potential adhesion, in the eyes of WB citizens. A growing trend of Euroscepticism in the WB region had previously been registered, in the 2016-2024 period⁶¹. The “polycrisis” that the EU faced during the 2010s seems transformed into a “permacrisis”⁶². Economically, politically, and morally the EU has been going through a crisis of legitimacy. In the framework of EU enlargement, it has been accused of double standards and of not delivering on its promises of integration. In the last years, the EU has arguably diminished its popularity in WB public opinion through dynamics such as: the controversial 2024 EU-Serbia Lithium Agreement, the decision of not backing protesters in Serbia vocally, the lack of advancements in North Macedonia’s dispute with Bulgaria, and the perception that Ukraine has been given a fast track for the accession.

Whereas all the aforementioned issues persist, the improvement in public attitude vis-à-vis the EU is due to the so-called momentum, that the enlargement is living. On the one hand, the new Commissioner for the Enlargement Marta Kos promised an expansion of the EU before 2029 and is acting accordingly. On the other hand, the “geopolitical imperative” and the rhetoric of enlarging for

⁶¹ Marinoni, ‘EU Enlargement and Public Opinion in the Western Balkans: How to Counter a Trend of Increasing Distrust’.

⁶² 2022-word of the year for the Collins dictionary: “an extended period of instability and insecurity, esp. one resulting from a series of catastrophic events”.

building a stronger Union, prompted by HR/VP Kaja Kallas and by the Commission’s President Von der Leyen have profound echo in the region.

Through the EU declarations and through personal diplomacy, enlargement seems back on the EU agenda, and WB citizens have perceived this window of opportunity as real this time, with nuances from country to country. According to data, public opinion in the region also believes more than ever before about their countries’ benefits deriving from a potential accession. As the two categories of voters are strongly correlated, this means that the new Von der Leyen Commission – established in December 2024 – has reignited hope in the region.

Given this analysis, some recommendations are put forward, related to the EU’s action in the region:

- The EU must now capitalize on the renewed enthusiasm from public opinion. Though in doing this, it has to achieve the difficult balance of supporting the “geopolitical imperative” narrative of including new countries to build a stronger Union, without compromising on the “merit-based approach”. In other words, before the end of Von der Leyen II mandate (2029), the EU must deliver on its promises of enlarging, though without making concessions on democratic standards. Including Montenegro is thus crucial, for its demographic light weight and for giving a signal after 12 years of stalemate⁶³. Concerning the inclusion of other candidates, which until last year were well behind in the negotiation process, the EU should carefully assess on their attainment of the Copenhagen criteria.
- The EU should be active in concretely addressing some of the most pressing issues in the region: prompting the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo; pushing Bosnia and Herzegovina for compliance with the 2009 ECHR Sejdic-Finci ruling; ease tensions between Bulgaria (and lately Greece, again) and North Macedonia, by managing to find an alternative forum to solve these disputes, decoupled from the adhesion process; pressurize President Vučić to “end repression against protesters, the academic community, political opposition, journalists and civil society”⁶⁴ and to organize free and fair elections.
- The EU must not neglect public opinion, both in the WB and in the EU member states. On the contrary, citizens from the WB must be informed and reassured about the feasibility and the benefits of the accession, once their countries fulfil all the conditions. On the other hand, citizens from the EU must be informed about the fairness of the process of enlargement, as countries (such as France⁶⁵) could go to referendum when it is the moment of the ratification of new accessions. The citizens of the WB region are already benefiting from some advantages of the “gradual integration”, such as, their inclusion in the SEPA circuit and in the EU roaming for internet. Still, they are very attentive to EU (in)action in the region and to the double standards it carries on. Generally speaking, the EU should try to recover its moral status in the region, to be considered a desired destination by citizens, mainly the youth, which are always the most vocal and active.

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⁶³ Corina Stratulat, *Montenegro’s EU Accession: A Confidence-Building Tutorial for the Union* (European Policy Centre (EPC), 2025), <https://www.epc.eu/publication/montenegreros-eu-accession-a-confidence-building-tutorial-for-the-union/>.

⁶⁴ This recommendation is a citation of one of the points underlined by the Friends of the Western Balkans’ (FOWB) Joint Statement, which is available at this link: <https://febs-europe.eu/news/friends-of-the-western-balkans-joint-statement/>

⁶⁵ Christian Lequesne, ‘‘Il est temps de lancer des débats publics approfondis sur les élargissements futurs de l’Union européenne’’, Débats, Tribunes, *Le Monde*, 19 December 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2024/12/19/il-est-temps-de-lancer-des-debats-publics-approfondis-sur-les-rlargissements-futurs-de-l-union-europeenne_6457298_3232.html.