POLICY BRIEF

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EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans: Credibility or Delay?

Addressing political vetoes and accession uncertainty through predictable benchmarks and staged integration in North Macedonia

KEY POINTS

1. Bilateral vetoes undermine trust. Unpredictable political blockages in the EU Council erode candidate states' confidence in the merit-based accession framework.

2. North Macedonia is a crucial test case. Major political compromises like the 2018 Prespa Agreement failed to guarantee immediate progress due to subsequent national vetoes.

3. Delays weaken reform drive. Unresolved political obstacles reduce incentives for democratic and economic reforms while strengthening eurosceptic narratives.

4. Staged benefits are necessary. Providing early access to EU single market programs and growth funds can maintain public and political engagement.

Summary

The European Union presents enlargement as a merit-based process that encourages democratic reforms, the rule of law, and regional stability. However, long accession timelines and political obstacles have raised questions about this policy's credibility in the Western Balkans. This brief asks: *How can the EU maintain a credible enlargement process while encouraging reforms?*

It examines the accession framework and uses North Macedonia as a case study, focusing on delays linked to bilateral disputes and their effect on trust in the EU. The analysis considers both sides: candidate countries must implement reforms, while EU institutions and member states must apply consistent conditions (European Commission, 2020; European Parliament, 2023).

The brief argues that unpredictable political blockages can weaken incentives for reform, even when technical progress is made. It recommends publishing clearer reform benchmarks, expanding gradual access to EU programmes and markets, and providing transparent explanations for accession decisions.

Why Does the Credibility of EU Enlargement Matter?

EU enlargement policy has historically been one of the European Union's most effective tools for spreading stability, democracy, and prosperity across the continent (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Founded on Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), accession is guided by the Copenhagen Criteria established in 1993. Candidate countries are expected to fulfill strict requirements regarding democratic institutions, the rule of law, market economy integration, and the adoption of the EU legal framework (acquis communautaire).

To ensure that candidate states meet these high standards, the European Commission introduced the "Fundamentals First" principle, prioritizing judicial reform, fundamental rights, and economic governance (European Commission, 2013). This principle was further reinforced in the 2020 Revised Enlargement Methodology, which promised a more dynamic, predictable, and credible path for candidates that execute deep domestic reforms (European Commission, 2020).

Despite these formal rules, a major gap has emerged between technical reform compliance and actual political progress. Candidate states in the Western Balkans frequently encounter political delays in the Council of the EU, where individual member states use unanimity voting to block progress over bilateral disputes (Bieber, 2020). When merit-based progress is replaced by national vetoes, candidate countries lose faith in the EU integration promise.

North Macedonia: A History of Compromises and Delays

North Macedonia represents one of the most vivid examples of accession delays caused by bilateral political disputes rather than technical reform shortcomings. The country applied for EU membership in 2004 and was granted official candidate status in 2005 (European Commission, 2023). Starting in 2009, the European Commission repeatedly recommended opening formal accession negotiations, confirming that the country had met the necessary criteria.

Year	Key Accession Milestone / Obstacle	Outcome & Political Impact
2005	Granted EU Candidate Status	Formal recognition of reform commitment.
2009–2018	Bilateral Dispute with Greece	Commission recommends talks; Council blocks due to Greek veto over country name.
2018	Prespa Agreement Signed	Skopje changes constitutional name to North Macedonia to resolve dispute.
2019	Council Postpones Decision	France requests new accession methodology before opening negotiations.
2020–Present	Bulgarian Veto on Negotiating Framework	Demands constitutional amendments & historical revisions regarding Bulgarian minority.

For nearly a decade, progress was blocked by a long-standing dispute with Greece over the country's official name. Demonstrating high political courage, Skopje signed the historic **Prespa Agreement in June 2018**, changing its constitutional name to the Republic of North Macedonia (Nechev & Nikolovski, 2020). This milestone was praised globally as a triumph of diplomacy and regional cooperation.

However, the expected opening of EU accession talks was again delayed. In October 2019, the European Council failed to open negotiations due to French demands for structural methodology reforms (Balfour & Stratulat, 2019). Then, after the EU adopted a Revised Methodology in 2020, Bulgaria imposed a new unilateral veto. Sofia demanded that North Macedonia recognize a Bulgarian minority in its constitution and address shared historical interpretations before formal negotiations could begin (EPRS, 2023).

> *A viable idea: Decoupling bilateral historical disputes from the technical accession process. Historical and linguistic disagreements should be handled in dedicated bilateral committees, preventing them from freezing official EU negotiation chapters.*

The Domestic and Geopolitical Impact of Accession Delays

Repeated delays after major national compromises create serious domestic consequences. When citizens and political leaders see that fulfilling difficult EU demands does not bring progress, motivation for further reform drops significantly. The European Parliament (2023) explicitly highlighted in its resolution that unjustified Council vetoes damage the EU's credibility and weaken domestic reform momentum in the Western Balkans.

Furthermore, prolonged uncertainty creates a geopolitical vacuum in the region. Foreign global actors, including Russia and China, exploit the EU's credibility deficit to increase their economic and political influence in candidate states (Council of the EU, 2023). Maintaining a clear, reliable accession path is therefore essential not only for reform in the Balkans but also for the European Union's own strategic security.

Restoring Credibility Through Structural Improvements

To rebuild mutual trust, the European Union must ensure that accession remains a truly merit-based, predictable, and transparent process. Candidate states must fulfill their obligations regarding rule of law and democratic standards, but EU institutions and member states must also deliver on their commitments when benchmarks are met.

The European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) can play a central role in advocating for key policy reforms that protect candidate states from arbitrary blockages while incentivizing continuous reform progress.

Policy Recommendations and Solutions

1. Establish Clear and Unbiased Reform Benchmarks: The European Commission and the Council must publish clear, measurable, and objective reform targets for each candidate country. Evaluation timetables should be strictly tied to technical progress in key areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption, and public administration. Bilateral historical or identity demands must be excluded from official negotiation benchmarks.

2. Expand Staged and Gradual Integration: Candidate countries should not have to wait for full membership to receive tangible benefits. Through mechanisms like the Western Balkans Growth Facility, candidate states that fulfill specific thematic requirements (e.g., energy transition, single market alignment) should gain early access to EU funding, single market benefits, and observer status in relevant Council working groups.

3. Improve Transparency in Council Decision-Making: The European Parliament should encourage member states to adopt Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) for intermediate technical decisions, such as opening and closing negotiation chapters. Unanimity should be reserved strictly for final accession treaties. When delays occur, the Council should publish formal justifications distinguishing technical deficiencies from political disagreements.

Conclusion

The EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans stands at a critical juncture. While candidate countries bear the responsibility of executing deep political and legal reforms, the European Union must maintain a consistent, trustworthy, and predictable framework.

The case of North Macedonia demonstrates that bilateral vetoes and shifting requirements undermine domestic reform incentives and diminish public trust in European integration. By introducing clearer benchmarks, staged integration benefits, and greater decision-making transparency, the EU can restore the credibility of its enlargement policy and ensure stability across the Western Balkans.

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