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BALKAN JOURNALS

The Pivotal Role of EU Engagement in North Macedonia: Internal Cohesion Implications amid Geopolitical Challenges

Gjeraqina Leka and Ebrar Ibraimi

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the crucial role that the EU plays in shaping North Macedonia's political and societal security dynamics, with a particular focus on how the recent security shifts in Europe and beyond may transform this relationship. By drawing on the Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by Buzan and Waever (2003), the paper seeks to reflect the EU's historically stabilizing role in North Macedonia. Given this country's delicate security position, the paper argues that EU integration represents a security cornerstone strategy. However, the recent geopolitical developments give rise to new political and societal challenges in North Macedonia, especially as external pressures from global powers increase while EU support and attention decrease. The article asserts that the ability of the EU to preserve its role as an anchoring factor in North Macedonia is continuously being diminished as a consequence of the recent security evolutions, regionally and globally. The prolonged EU integration process and the geopolitical volatility in Eastern Europe weaken the EU's vital influence, which might furthermore deepen internal ethnic cleavages, erode democratic governance, and amplify regional insecurities. In such a context, a reassessment of the EU's role as an equilibrator of North Macedonia's multiple security issues is of paramount priority, particularly in light of the increasing influence of Eastern powers, which aim to exploit the local disappointment with the EU perspective. The paper concludes with recommendations on strengthening the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans, ensuring that the region remains on an unambiguous path toward full EU membership, amid new security threats.

Keywords: EU, security shifts, North Macedonia, geopolitics, regional security

Introduction

In North Macedonia's case, foreign policy, despite its universally accepted role in ensuring the country's survival within the international anarchical system (Donnelly, 2015; Korvela, 2018), has served as a unifying force domestically. Scholars widely agree that integration strengthens inter-ethnic relations and delays in the process risk exacerbating tensions and domestic instability. Many of them view NATO and EU membership as critical to North Macedonia's sovereignty and internal stability, functioning as a "glue" in a multiethnic society facing societal divisions. The broad national consensus on international integration reflects its promise of political, economic, and security benefits across ethnic divides (Pendarovski, 2012; Marolov, 2014; Vankovska, 2017; Nuhija, 2013). As demonstrated by the Prespa Agreement, which resolved the long-standing name dispute with Greece, the EU's involvement was critical in facilitating consensus between the country's ethnic groups, thus reinforcing national cohesion (Bechev, 2022). The agreement not only allowed the country to join NATO but also initiated a pre-entry screening phase with the European Union (Manzinger, 2020). However, just as the path to EU integration seemed unblocked, a new challenge arose with Bulgaria. Bulgaria's demands, focusing on historical and identity-related issues, posed a new barrier to North Macedonia's EU accession (Vangelov, 2023). In November 2020, Bulgaria refused to adopt a negotiating framework, insisting that North Macedonia make constitutional amendments acknowledging what Sofia regards as their shared history (Brunnbauer, 2022). This veto effectively decoupled North Macedonia from Albania in October 2024, which was allowed to proceed with opening negotiations (Taylor-Brace & Gotov, 2024).

The Bulgarian blockade underscores the fragility of the EU accession process, as individual member states can influence the enlargement agenda in line with their national interests (Brunnbauer, 2022). Bulgaria's demands have placed North Macedonia in a precarious position, where it is required to navigate between domestic pressures and external demands. The ongoing stalemate not only hampers the country's progress toward EU membership but also undermines the shared vision of Euro-Atlantic integration, which has served as a unifying force between the country's two major ethnic groups, Macedonians and Albanians (Vasilev, 2011; Serwer, 2018). Without a cohesive objective, there is a possibility of renewed ethnic tensions, which could have an impact on the country's internal stability and regional relations.

The above predicament, which links the absence of EU integration as a cohesive objective to inter-ethnic instability and further regional insecurity, is evidenced by past situations when North Macedonia was under Greece's blockade, and these blockades disrupted the country's EU integration prospects. The Greek veto regarding the name dispute with North Macedonia introduced notable challenges, with emerging differences in foreign policy orientations between the ethnic Macedonian and Albanian communities potentially influencing the cohesion of the state. As Vankovska (2017) explains, external pressures coupled with internal ethnic divisions resulted in a fragmented and incoherent foreign policy approach.

The split between the two ethnic groups during the Greek blockade further highlights how blockades to EU integration can exacerbate internal divisions. As Pendarovski (2012) notes, the Euro-Atlantic agenda became a divisive factor between Macedonian and Albanian communities, especially after 2008, when the blockade stalled Macedonia's NATO and EU aspirations. Perceiving delays in political processes, members of the Albanian community supported accelerated approaches to dispute resolution, whereas among the ethnic Macedonian community, there were concerns that independent diplomatic efforts might impact national interests and interethnic relations (Nuhija, 2013). The growing gap between the two groups, as reflected in their differing attitudes toward external threats and the EU integration process, raised concerns among politicians and analysts about the potential for heightened tensions based on divergent foreign policy strategies and perceptions of national identity (Koppa, 2001).

Besides the stalled EU integration process due to Bulgaria's blockade, the EU's pivotal role in stabilizing North Macedonia is being further diminished by recent geopolitical shifts, notably the war in Ukraine. The conflict in Ukraine has shifted the EU's focus toward Eastern Europe, draining attention and resources from the Western Balkans. This redirection of priorities weakens the EU's presence and influence in the region, leaving a vacuum that other actors, particularly Russia, are eager to fill. As many scholars argue, Russia seeks to undermine the EU's efforts in the Balkans by capitalizing on regional instability and unresolved societal divisions (Malaj & Mahmutaj, 2023; Polovic, 2023). This trend is noteworthy in a context where the EU, historically regarded as a stabilizing presence, faces challenges in maintaining its influence.

Without tangible progress toward EU integration, North Macedonia becomes increasingly vulnerable to external influences, particularly from Russia. Scholars emphasize that Russia's engagement in the region often aims to destabilize

Western-aligned states by leveraging societal divisions (Stronski & Himes, 2019; Bechev, 2017; Polovic, 2023; Zivotic & Obradovic, 2022). The weakening of EU engagement creates conditions that external actors may seek to exploit, given the region's strategic importance. In North Macedonia, the stalled accession process has strained existing societal dynamics, and without a strong and unifying European perspective, there is a risk that nationalist actors could pursue alternative strategies, further challenging social cohesion and regional stability.

This paper is built around the thesis that the EU's diminishing influence amid ongoing geopolitical and regional challenges—such as the war in Ukraine and the stalled EU integration process for North Macedonia— may contribute to growing societal divisions, democratic challenges, and tensions in regional relations, with possible implications for stability in the Western Balkans. As the EU's focus shifts away from the Balkans and towards more immediate security concerns, such as the conflict in Eastern Europe, external actors like Russia find fertile ground to expand their influence, drawing on unresolved societal dynamics in North Macedonia. The absence of a tangible EU integration process creates a power vacuum that authoritarian regimes exploit, promoting nationalist agendas that undermine democratic institutions and the rule of law. The Western Balkans, though geographically part of Europe, remain politically outside the EU framework, making it a vulnerable area that, if destabilized, could contribute to wider security concerns across the continent. Given the intricate security linkages between the EU and the Western Balkans, the region's instability could eventually reverberate back into the EU itself, undermining both regional and European security as a whole, as Buzan and Weaver's Regional Security Complex Theory suggests. It is therefore important for the EU to recognize that overlooking security developments in the region may have implications not only for the Western Balkans but also for broader European stability.

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the European Union's role and response in North Macedonia and the broader Western Balkans through the lens of Buzan and Weaver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT provides a framework for understanding how security dynamics within a region are interconnected and how external actors, like the EU, can either stabilize (if present) or destabilize (if absent) these systems. By applying RSCT, the paper will assess how the EU's diminishing influence, compounded by geopolitical shifts such as the war in Ukraine and internal blockades like the Bulgarian veto, has affected the region's political stability, inter-ethnic relations, and democratic governance. Furthermore, the paper

aims to offer strategic recommendations on how the EU can regain its balancing role, reinvigorate its engagement in the Western Balkans, and address the regional security complexities that pose threats not only to local stability but also to the broader European security architecture. These recommendations will focus on revitalizing the EU's integration process, strengthening democratic institutions, and countering malign influences from authoritarian regimes that exploit the current vacuum of power.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Since the security dynamics are, by nature, relational, analyzing the security issues of North Macedonia would require analysis within its regional context. The regional level explains the way security is sufficiently linked with other units. Buzan and Waever (2003) define the Regional Security Complex as "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another" (p. 44). The relations within regions are characterized by patterns of amity and enmity, caused usually by historical or cultural factors, and the closer these states are located physically, the greater their security interaction may be. Thus, the standard form of RSC is characterized by rivalry, power balancing, or alliance building among the main powers of the region; however, the latter may also be penetrated by external powers (pp. 40-44).

North Macedonia is located within the Balkans, a region which moved from being almost a complex in its own right, through the process of *Balkanization,* in the early 90s, to a subcomplex of the wider Europe-EU regional complex by the late 90s. The fact that security issues in the Balkans of the 90s, such as ethnic cleansing, wars, and dehumanization, were substantially different from the issues within the region of Europe, motivated scholarly attempts to delimit this region as a world region, separate from that of Europe. The counter-argument to this position, however, is that the Balkan region was never completely independent from European influence. In this context, Todorova (1997) argues that it would be a mistaken approach to view the Balkans independently of the wider entanglements, in particular of the socio-economic and intellectual formations of Western Europe, as they have had certain influences over the realities in the Balkans. The interaction of the Balkans with the wider European security dynamics oscillated from being almost independent to merging into one European regional complex.

Buzan and Weaver (2003) argue that the Balkans' region, within which North Macedonia is located, cannot be considered as a separate RSC, since its developments did not take place in an isolated fashion. The internationalization of North Macedonia's issue(s) and the level of international involvement in it may be an example that illustrates the above argument. The fact that external actors exert their influence on the formation of events in the Balkans causes the latter to be considered part of the EU-Europe RSC. Such involvement by external actors, besides deriving from their perception of the Balkans as 'part of us', or as 'Europeans', is also demanded and expected by the Balkans' local actors. The opening of an EU perspective for the Balkan countries, including North Macedonia, would become a signal of Europe's perception of the Balkans as part of the European RSC. The question then is where does Macedonia stand in relation to EU-Europe as a world region, and how do its security issues interact with the latter? In order to answer these questions, an overview of the main security patterns within EU-Europe region will be provided below.

Analyzing the security patterns within Europe in the post-Cold War period, Buzan (2003) argues that two dominant issues became almost the main organizing principles of this region. The first issue was the determination to avoid returning to the old Europe and the balance of powers, which had caused devastating wars. The result of this determination brought about the project of integration as the ultimate solution. The second issue stood in contradiction to the first, as it maintained that integration would threaten national identity. In relation to the first issue, it is precisely the Balkans, the "Europe's ghost reminding it of the risks of war" (p. 357). Furthermore, during the 90s, the ethnic conflicts, typical for the Balkans, would become a security issue for Europe due to their possibility of dragging the big powers into opposing sides of the conflict and reinstalling power politics among the main EU states. These conflicts are therefore related to the calculations of the EU integration/fragmentation effects. In other words, EU integration becomes a security dimension that would prevent the return of Europe to the infamous past, by disabling wars and power balancing. To the EU, whereas the German-French relationship represents the conflicting past of Europe, acting against conflicts, such as in Bosnia or Kosovo, represents the way of defending a peaceful future. Thus, EU integration, according to Buzan, represents a security strategy more so for the states with a concrete and realistic EU membership perspective, such as Hungary at the beginning of the 2000s (and what would be most of the Balkan states today). This is so since the integration mechanism within such states may help downplay other security issues, such as ethnic issues, until the state reaches a stronger position (as an EU member) before reopening them.

In contrast to its more limited role during earlier Balkan crises, the European Union adopted a more proactive approach during the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia. At that time, the EU had already demonstrated its commitment to deeper engagement in the country by signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2001. By opening a pathway toward potential EU membership, Europe conveyed a clear message of support for North Macedonia's European future. Six months into the conflict, the EU, in coordination with the United States, played a key role in facilitating negotiations that led to the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which was developed with the contribution of legal experts, including Robert Badinter. Following the agreement, the EU maintained a sustained presence in North Macedonia, supporting post-conflict reforms and political stabilization. In 2005, the country's progress was recognized through the granting of EU candidate status (Dobbins et al., 2013, p. 51).

As of 2024, the EU integration process continues to play an important role in fostering greater cohesion among different communities within North Macedonia, including ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. Polls indicate that the prospect of EU membership remains a shared aspiration across these groups, despite differences in historical experiences and perspectives (Damjanovski, 2023; IRI, 2023). The EU integration agenda offers a common framework for cooperation, supporting both societal and political stability. As Nuhiu (2019) notes, the EU's conditionality emphasizes the protection of human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law — principles that contribute to strengthening the institutional resilience of diverse societies such as North Macedonia.

The societal role of the EU in the domestic realm extends beyond mere political alignment; it creates a framework for both ethnic Macedonians and Albanians to work towards a common future within the European fold. In the absence of this integrative vision, as seen during the periods of stalled EU accession due to external blockades (e.g., the name issue with Greece), these groups have at times pursued distinct strategies, which can pose challenges to national cohesion. The shared aspiration for EU membership acts as a stabilizing factor, helping to maintain interethnic stability.

The Historical Role of the EU in North Macedonia's Security

The European Union has historically played a critical role in stabilizing North Macedonia's political and societal security, acting as a mediator and facilitator for peace

and development. The EU's influence, particularly through its enlargement process and conditionality framework, has provided the country with both external legitimacy and internal stability. EU integration has consistently been linked to maintaining internal ethnic cohesion and bolstering democratic governance. The EU's emphasis on good governance, rule of law, and minority rights—embedded within its accession criteria—has created a framework for North Macedonia to resolve conflicts and promote political cohesion (Nuhija, 2013).

The EU's role in supporting the stabilization of North Macedonia became particularly evident following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which brought an end to the conflict between the Albanian and Macedonian communities. The OFA established a foundation for a multiethnic political framework, introducing power-sharing mechanisms that enhanced the participation of all major communities in governance. Through its conditionality mechanism, the EU linked the implementation of the OFA to North Macedonia's progress toward EU membership. This approach provided incentives for the country's political leadership to undertake reforms aimed at strengthening inclusive governance and promoting political participation across communities, thereby contributing to the country's overall stability (see Reka, 2008; Serwer, 2018; Risteska, 2013; Marolov, 2013).

Furthermore, the EU's involvement extended beyond political stability. The promise of EU integration acted as a unifying force in a country with a complex societal fabric. Both Macedonians and Albanians viewed EU membership as a common objective that would bring economic development, security, and international legitimacy. According to Vankovska (2017), EU and NATO membership were perceived as not only foreign policy goals but also essential to the internal security of the country, serving as a 'glue' to keep the society together (pp. 6-7).

Another landmark example of the EU's stabilizing role is the resolution of the decades-long name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece through the Prespa Agreement in 2018. The EU played a key role in mediating this conflict, which had blocked North Macedonia's NATO membership and EU accession talks for over a decade. By resolving the name issue, North Macedonia was able to move forward with NATO membership and open pre-entry talks with the EU. This agreement not only enhanced North Macedonia's external security but also reinforced internal political cohesion. (Manzinger, 2020; Bechev, 2022)

In sum, the EU's historical role in North Macedonia has been that of a stabilizer, providing both a framework for ethnic reconciliation and a path for integration

into the broader European community. Its role in resolving the name dispute and fostering regional diplomacy illustrates the EU's influence in maintaining internal and external security, underscoring the critical importance of continued EU engagement in the region.

The Impact of the Prolonged EU Integration Process

The prolonged and stalled EU integration process has significantly weakened the European Union's influence in North Macedonia, creating internal divisions, slowing domestic reforms, and intensifying societal disillusionment. Despite initial high hopes for EU membership, the country's path toward integration has been repeatedly obstructed, first by the Greek veto over the name dispute, and more recently by the Bulgarian veto concerning historical and national identity issues. This delay has diminished the EU's credibility as a transformative force and a mediator in resolving ethnic tensions and fostering democratic reforms.

According to Pendarovski (2012), North Macedonia's strategic orientation toward EU and NATO membership has long served as a unifying factor for its ethnically polarized society. Both ethnic Macedonians and Albanians initially saw EU integration as the ultimate means to secure political stability, sovereignty, and economic prosperity. However, as the accession process has stagnated, largely due to external blockades, this consensus has started to fray. While support for EU integration remains particularly strong among ethnic Albanians, segments of the ethnic Macedonian community have shown growing skepticism and disillusionment due to the prolonged accession process (IDSCS, 2024). The Bulgarian veto, which demands constitutional changes acknowledging a shared history, has been a significant roadblock in the country's EU integration process. Despite the resolution of the name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement, the subsequent blockade by Bulgaria has not only delayed the opening of EU negotiations but also strained relations between North Macedonia's two largest ethnic communities. After overcoming the name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement in 2018, North Macedonia's path toward integration seemed clear, with the country officially joining NATO in 2020. However, the veto imposed by Bulgaria has left the country in a prolonged pre-accession limbo, creating a sense of frustration and disillusionment, particularly among ethnic Macedonians. This situation has highlighted differing attitudes between North Macedonia's two largest ethnic communities. While support for EU integration remains strong among ethnic Albanians,

particularly regarding a swift resolution of the Bulgarian dispute, segments of the ethnic Macedonian community have shown increasing skepticism toward the process (360 Stepeni, 2025).

As a result of persistent external blockades hindering North Macedonia's progress toward EU integration, public sentiment has increasingly shifted towards skepticism about the benefits of EU membership. This growing Euroscepticism is evident in recent opinion polls. The latter underscores the decline in support for EU membership, particularly among ethnic Macedonians, and demonstrates the growing divide between the country's two largest ethnic communities. According to a 2023 public opinion analysis by the Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis (IDSCS), only 60% of the overall Macedonian population supported the country's EU membership prospects, marking the lowest level of support to date. More notably, the poll revealed a significant ethnic gap, with 57% of ethnic Macedonians expressing support for EU membership, compared to 78% of ethnic Albanians (IDSCS, 2023). This declining support is further complicated by the fact that only 12% of the population identifies as openly Eurosceptic, while a growing proportion—approximately 30%—remains undecided or apathetic about the country's EU future. This shift reflects a deepening sense of frustration and pessimism, which view the stalled integration process as evidence of the EU's declining relevance to North Macedonia's political and economic stability. The continuous delays, compounded by the Bulgarian veto, have eroded the initial optimism and consensus that once united the country's diverse ethnic groups around the goal of EU accession.

The data presented above illustrate the important role that the EU integration process continues to play in shaping interethnic relations in North Macedonia. As Koneska et al. (2023) observe, the ongoing dispute with Bulgaria over issues of national identity presents challenges to social cohesion, with segments of the ethnic Macedonian community increasingly perceiving certain EU-related demands as sensitive to questions of sovereignty. Political leaders from the ethnic Albanian community have largely taken a more reserved approach toward these bilateral disputes, leaving the management of identity-related negotiations primarily to the ethnic Macedonian leadership. Nonetheless, this divergence carries the risk of deepening societal divisions, particularly if the prospect of EU integration becomes increasingly elusive.

The EU's decision to separate the accession paths of Albania and North Macedonia carries important implications for both the country's external positioning and internal cohesion (Taylor-Brace & Gotov, 2024). Externally, North Macedonia's

accession process remains slowed by unresolved issues with Bulgaria, while Albania advances toward opening its first negotiating cluster (Stojanovic, 2024). This situation places North Macedonia at a disadvantage internationally and creates uncertainty about its European trajectory, raising concerns about potential external influences whose interests may not align with the country's European aspirations. Internally, the divergence in accession progress may introduce pressures on societal cohesion, as segments of the population with strong support for EU integration may experience frustration. Managing these dynamics carefully will be essential to preserving North Macedonia's stability and shared commitment to the European integration path.

Beyond the political and societal tensions already outlined, North Macedonia's prolonged EU integration process also leaves unaddressed a set of wider internal security challenges. Issues such as organized crime, irregular migration flows, socioeconomic inequalities, and governance weaknesses persist as underlying vulnerabilities (Crisis Group, 2020; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022; Arnaudov, 2024). These factors not only strain institutional capacities but also undermine public trust in democratic processes, creating fertile ground for political fragmentation and societal polarization. While not always directly linked to external actors, such challenges can be exacerbated by regional instability and the slow pace of EU integration, emphasizing the need for comprehensive internal reforms alongside broader geopolitical engagement.

Geopolitical Shifts and Their Impact on North Macedonia

The geopolitical security shifts, particularly the war in Ukraine, have significantly diverted the EU's attention from the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, further complicating the region's EU integration prospects. As articulated by Kolarski (2022), the war in Ukraine has imposed a series of urgent tasks on the EU, such as securing energy supplies and sanctioning Russia, which has redirected its focus away from the Balkans. This shift, coupled with the slow pace of the EU enlargement process, exacerbates existing frustrations in North Macedonia, where citizens and political actors have long been disillusioned by the stalled accession process, further delayed by Bulgaria's veto.

Hasic et al. (2020) argue that these delays create a vacuum in the EU's traditional role as a stabilizer in the region. The EU has long played a stabilizing role in the Western Balkans, utilizing its enlargement policy to promote political and societal

reforms aimed at integrating these countries into the European framework. However, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the EU's resources have been increasingly diverted to support Ukraine's defense and reconstruction efforts. As Dopchie and Lika (2024) point out, the EU's response to the war in Ukraine has seen a significant allocation of resources to countries in Eastern Europe. For instance, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status for EU membership in 2022, a process that was notably expedited due to the geopolitical urgency of integrating these states into the EU as a countermeasure to Russian aggression (Regi, 2024). This fast-tracking of Eastern European states stands in stark contrast to the slow progress made by Western Balkan countries, particularly North Macedonia, which has been a candidate for EU membership since 2005. This redirection of the EU's focus has left the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, in a precarious position, where they must contend with both internal and external security challenges with less EU engagement than before. North Macedonia, which has faced blockades to its EU accession from neighboring Bulgaria, now faces a delayed integration process due to the EU's prioritization of Eastern Europe. This further prolongs the country's vulnerability to destabilizing influences, which seek to expand their presence in the region through political and economic channels (Jakesevic, 2024).

Tying the findings to the RSCT theory

Relying on Buzan and Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory (2003), the insecurity in North Macedonia is best understood as a catalyst for potential instability within the wider Western Balkans region. RSCT emphasized the security interdependence within certain regions, where the stability or uncertainty of one state impacts tremendously the other neighboring states. In North Macedonia's case, the stalled EU integration process, combined with existing societal sensitivities, creates conditions that could challenge internal stability and, by extension, impact the broader Western Balkans region, where peace remains delicate and certain disputes unresolved.

North Macedonia occupies a unique and important position within the security dynamics of the Western Balkans. Its geopolitical significance, combined with its diverse societal composition, has made the country a focal point for both internal and external security considerations. Scholars have noted that the state's orientation toward EU and NATO integration has played a critical role in supporting internal cohesion by fostering shared aspirations across different communities. However, prolonged delays in the integration process, particularly the separation of Albania and North Macedonia's accession paths, risk straining this delicate balance. Recent

observations suggest that segments of the population, particularly among those with strong support for European integration, have expressed growing frustration over the bilateral disputes that hinder the country's progress (Neziri cited in Ramadani, VOA, 2024). If not carefully addressed, such sentiments could place additional pressure on societal cohesion and political stability.

According to Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), instability in North Macedonia can have broader implications, as societal tensions and nationalistic sentiments are interconnected across the Western Balkans. The interdependent nature of the region's security environment suggests that unrest in one area may impact the overall stability of the complex. States within the Western Balkans share comparable vulnerabilities, shaped by historical legacies, societal divisions, and institutional challenges. This fragile stability is further influenced by the involvement of external actors who may seek to shape regional dynamics for strategic purposes.

The diplomatic challenges between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, combined with the stalled EU integration process, have created conditions that external actors may seek to influence. Russia, in particular, has been identified as leveraging regional instability to challenge the EU's and NATO's presence in the Western Balkans (Jakesevic, 2024). By reinforcing existing societal and political divisions, such external engagement can complicate efforts toward democratic consolidation and regional stability. Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), external powers are often seen as 'penetrators' that exacerbate internal vulnerabilities and hinder conflict resolution. These dynamics are reflected in broader patterns of external involvement in parts of the Western Balkans where European integration enjoys significant public support.

Uncertainty surrounding North Macedonia's EU integration prospects carries important implications for European security. Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the Western Balkans is considered an integral component of the broader European security architecture. Given the region's geographical and political proximity to the EU, developments in the Western Balkans can have a direct impact on European stability. The credibility of the EU as a security actor may be challenged if it is perceived as unable to advance the enlargement process, particularly in cases like North Macedonia. Prolonged stagnation could create a gap that external actors might seek to exploit for strategic purposes. With the EU's resources already stretched due to the war in Ukraine, maintaining engagement in the Western Balkans remains an important priority for safeguarding regional and broader European stability.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Revitalizing EU Engagement

The EU's commitment to the Western Balkans remains a complex and developing concept, marked both by achievements and continuous challenges. Whereas critics underline risks related to stagnation and potential weakening of EU's credibility as a security actor, it is just as important to acknowledge the fact that EU's conditionality has historically served as a powerful instrument in promoting democratic reforms, strengthening good governance, and fostering institutional sustainability in states aspiring to join it (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). This dual nature of the EU reflects its transformative potential as well as the difficulties in sustaining momentum toward full integration. In the face of renewed geopolitical challenges and internal challenges within the region, there is an urgent need for the EU to revitalize its role, reassert its commitment, and enhance its strategic focus on the Western Balkans in order to ensure regional and wider European security.

To address the challenges that North Macedonia and the wider Western Balkans face, the EU should adopt a multifaceted and proactive strategy. In the center of this approach should lie the determination to accelerate the EU integration process for North Macedonia. The delayed process has caused disappointment and euroscepticism, undermining the trust in the EU enlargement process, which is merit-based. The application of such a membership model may counter these effects, allowing candidate countries like North Macedonia to participate in key programs and policies of the EU, such as the Single Market and the climate agenda, even before full membership is achieved (Tcherneva, 2023). Such an approach would offer tangible benefits, would rebuild trust, and would signal progress, addressing thus the stagnation caused by bilateral disputes and political delays (Dopcchie & Lika, 2024; Tcherneva, 2023).

Equally critical is the enforcement of the EU's conditionality mechanism, particularly in areas such as the rule of law and good governance. The democratic backsliding and the rise of 'stabilitocracies' in the region have undermined the reform efforts, necessitating a stronger EU stance against corruption and state capture (Scazzieri, 2021). The prioritization of these reforms as preconditions to further accession talks would stabilize the political landscape of North Macedonia and would curb the influence of external authoritarian regimes. By engaging actively with the political elites and civil society, the EU may ensure that the reforms are implemented consistently, fostering resilient, democratic, and functioning institutions.

Alongside the above recommendations, the EU should also counter the increasing influence of external actors, in particular of Russia, whose destabilizing activities threaten regional stability. The strengthening of security partnerships with the Balkan States is essential, and in North Macedonia's case, this may include financial and technical support for cybersecurity infrastructure and combating disinformation, which aims to further polarize the country on ethnic and political grounds (Jakesevic, 2024).

The revival of the EU's credibility in the Western Balkans is among the most crucial steps in addressing the pressing challenges. The EU should respect its commitments to integrate the region into its structures, while offering a clear and time-bound roadmap for membership, by officializing the 2030 enlargement target with concrete milestones (Tcherneva, 2023). This would signal a renewed commitment to the region and would mitigate the risk of democratic and stability backsliding, which could otherwise push the Western Balkans towards alternative, yet dangerous geopolitical alignments.

In conclusion, revitalizing EU engagement with North Macedonia and the Western Balkans requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both the internal and external factors contributing to instability. By accelerating the accession process, prioritizing governance reforms, fostering inter-ethnic dialogue, and countering external influences, the EU can regain its balancing role and prevent further deterioration of security conditions in the region. These steps are not only crucial for North Macedonia's stability but also for ensuring the long-term security of the entire Western Balkans and the EU itself.

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