

Balancing Backsliding and Solidifying Stagnation

A comparative case study on EU conditionality and
democratic backsliding in Serbia and North Macedonia.



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Abstract

The European Union has long been regarded as a global transformative power, capable of promoting democratic reforms in candidate countries through its merit-based enlargement process. However, democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans has raised concerns about the credibility and effectiveness of EU conditionality. This thesis examines the extent to which the EU enlargement process has enabled or constrained democratic backsliding in North Macedonia and Serbia, and why their trajectories differ despite shared structural and institutional foundations. Using a Most-Similar-Systems-Design, the study combines document analysis and process tracing across EU reports from 2008 to 2026, combined with quantitative data and reports from civil society. The analysis is based on a theoretical framework that draws from Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier's external incentives model, Bermeo's concept of executive aggrandisement, and Tzifakis & Vasdoka's notion of reversed conditionality. The analysis is structured around 3 hypotheses: Geopolitical shift, Elite capture and reversed conditionality, and Enlargement fatigue. The findings conclude that EU conditionality has lost its foundational credibility. In Serbia, the union is exposed to reversed conditionality, accommodating the political elite's will out of fear of losing influence in the region; in North Macedonia, the process has lost credibility in recent years due to a flawed accession process. The key difference between the two cases is geopolitical leverage, which Serbia possesses and North Macedonia does not.

Keywords: EU conditionality, democratic backsliding, Western Balkans, enlargement fatigue, elite capture

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1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long been considered a transformative power internationally, especially through its enlargement policy with its aim of promoting democratisation and EU values in candidate countries. The EU's leverage, however, seems to be weakening. Since the 2010s, scholars have identified a “third wave of autocratisation”, a global trend of democratic backsliding, carried out through institutional mechanisms rather than coups. In recent years, this wave has reached the EU and its candidate states, notably those in the Western Balkans (Nord et al., 2026, p. 20-21).

North Macedonia and Serbia serve as analytically valuable cases for examining the puzzle of democratic backsliding in EU candidate states. Both were republics of Yugoslavia between 1945 and 1991, and both have been on the EU accession path for over a decade. The countries have received significant EU support to meet the union's integration standards, yet their democratic trajectories differ significantly. Their shared history and accession status, combined with the differences in democratic developments, make them a good pair for comparison. Examining the two cases side by side allows for a deeper understanding of why EU conditionality seems to constrain democratic backsliding in some contexts, while enabling it in others.

North Macedonia has experienced democratic stagnation since gaining its independence in 1991, but it is generally regarded as a democratising state, having made notable progress since 2015. On the Liberal Democracy Index for 2025, it ranked 85th, reflecting gradual improvements in democratic practices. Serbia, on the other hand, is ranked 112th, placing it within the bottom 40 percent of countries worldwide. It is classified as undergoing autocratisation, marked by democratic decline and increasing concentration in the hands of political elites (Nord et al., 2026, p. 46-47). Although North Macedonia has made progress over the past decade, it remains a “grey zone” regime, operating between democracy and autocracy, whereas Serbia has been labeled an “electoral autocracy” (Nord et al., 2026, p. 11).

The weak state of democracy in both countries, despite extensive EU support and the Union's promises of democratic development, raises a critical question: what has happened to the

EU's leverage over its candidate states? The European Union has long been perceived as a transformative power capable of driving democratic reform in its aspiring member states; hence, the emerging anti-democratic tendencies in the Western Balkans threaten the EU's credibility.

While many scholars have emphasised EU conditionality as a transformative tool for democratic reform, fewer studies explore how it may enable democratic backsliding, or be strategically manipulated by political elites. This study addresses that gap, guided by the research question: *To what extent has EU conditionality constrained or enabled democratic backsliding in North Macedonia and Serbia, and why?* The analysis is structured around three hypotheses that aim to explain the loss of EU leverage in the Western Balkans: Geopolitical shift, Elite manipulation and reversed conditionality, and Enlargement fatigue.

2 Background

2.1 The EU accession process

European Union membership is conditional on meeting a comprehensive set of political, economic, and institutional criteria. These criteria were formalized at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993, formally known as the Copenhagen Criteria, which are: stable institutions, democracy, rule of law, human rights, and minority rights; a functioning and strong market economy capable of handling economic pressures from within the Union, and general capacity to take on the obligations that membership demands. These criteria established the logic of EU conditionality; membership is a reward for reform and transformation (European Council, 1993).

In practice, the accession process is structured around a series of negotiating chapters, currently numbering 35. The candidate country must open, negotiate, and close each chapter in which it demonstrates compliance with EU standards. Progress is monitored by the European Commission, which publishes reports on each candidate country's performance throughout all chapters. These reports serve as accountability benchmarks against which candidate states are measured (European Union, n.d.).

In 2020, the methodology was revised, placing greater emphasis on the rule of law and underscoring that regression in key areas could lead to the suspension of negotiations. While the goal was to strengthen conditionality, critics argue that this approach reflects a shift in the logic of EU enlargement. This tension between conditionality as a tool for democratic transformation and a geopolitical tool is the main driving force for this thesis (European Commission, 2020a).

2.2 Serbia

Serbia is the largest country in the Western Balkans, both in terms of size and population, and is therefore considered a key actor for regional stability. Its capital, Belgrade, once served as the political centre of Yugoslavia, a state that dissolved in the early 1990s. The breakup was accompanied by rising ethnic tensions that led to a decade of violent conflicts, known as the Yugoslav wars. During the wars of the 1990s, the EU and the UN adopted long-lasting economic sanctions on the government of Serbia, following the violent actions and war under President Slobodan Milošević's regime. The Serbian government remained subject to several rounds of international sanctions until the early 2000s. When the Yugoslavian president Milošević was overthrown and later indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 1999, the sanctions on the Serbian government began to be withdrawn (Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac, 2021, p. 267; Bieber, 2018).

After the war ended, the EU was quick to put the Western Balkan countries on the path to EU accession. The EU invested heavily in the region to promote democracy and stability, and to prepare the countries for eventual EU accession (Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac, 2021, p. 267). Serbia, along with five other Western Balkan countries, was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership in 2003. In 2007, the Serbian government took credible measures to cooperate with the ICTY (EU delegation to Serbia, 2025). Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac (2021) argue that this compliance with the ICTY enabled the country's further progress in the EU accession process. However, compliance with the EU's democracy criteria and aid agenda was insufficient (Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac, 2021, p. 274). Serbia set out priorities for the EU membership application in 2008 and formally applied in 2009. Serbia was granted EU

candidate status in 2012. As of April 2026, 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened since the formal start of Serbia's accession negotiations (European Commission, 2025a).

Almost fifteen years have passed since Serbia was granted official EU candidate status. Despite the strong EU presence, active promotion of EU norms, and over 3.7 billion euros in financial assistance aimed at strengthening the rule of law and administrative reform (European Western Balkans, 2022a), the domestic political landscape of Serbia is dominated by increased state control of the media, reduction of civic spaces, and serious democratic backsliding. Since President Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2014, political power has become increasingly concentrated among the elite, and the quality of the Serbian elections has been undermined to the extent that they are no longer considered free and fair (Nord et al, 2026, p.25)

2.3 North Macedonia

North Macedonia's EU accession trajectory appears paradoxical: the country has demonstrated reform commitments over two decades, yet it still lacks EU membership. The country, like Serbia, was part of the Republic of Yugoslavia and was unique among the republics in achieving independence peacefully in 1991. Despite this, the 1990s were marked by interethnic tensions between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. The formalization of Macedonia sparked political reactions from neighboring countries, mainly from Bulgaria and Greece (Trajanovski, 2024, p. 133).

In 2001, tensions between Albanians and Macedonians erupted into an armed conflict after ethnic Albanians demanded minority rights due to experiencing discrimination and political exclusion. The conflict was resolved through the *Ohrid Framework Agreement* (OFA), which established a power-sharing system between the two ethnic groups. The OFA also formalized Macedonia's early commitment to EU norms, granting it candidate status in 2005 (Trajanovski, 2024, p. 134; Bieber, 2008).

The following years were marked by severe domestic political crises. Under Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, whose VMRO-DPMNE party governed from 2006, the country experienced significant democratic backsliding. The crisis culminated in 2015 when a wiretapping scandal

revealed that the government had conducted a mass surveillance of politicians, journalists, civil society figures, where over 20.000 phone-numbers were wiretapped (European Commission, 2016a, p. 4). Political turmoil was partially resolved by the Pržino Agreement, brokered by the EU, which paved the way for early elections and, eventually, a transfer of power to the Social Democratic-led government (SDSM) of Zoran Zaev in 2017, which would commit further to EU and NATO integration. (European Commission, 2016a, p. 4; 2020b, p. 7).

North Macedonia's entry into the union was vetoed by Greece over a dispute over the name "Macedonia". After 10 years of blockage, the veto was lifted with the Prespa Agreement and the name change to "North Macedonia" in 2018. Through substantial reforms, the country was granted NATO membership in 2020 (Maksuti, 2026, p. 190). Despite this, Bulgaria introduced a new veto blocking North Macedonia's accession negotiations, demanding constitutional recognition of the Bulgarian minority and disputing the country's historical and linguistic narrative. (European Commission, 2025b, p. 21). Protests erupted in 2022 over this second blocking of the path to membership, expressing frustration and uncertainty about the EU's intentions (Bytyci, 2022).

In 2022, Bulgaria's veto was "lifted" through the *French Proposal*, a solution that embedded Sofia's demands into the EU's requirements for Skopje. The French proposal further politicized the process. In 2024, SDSM suffered a substantial defeat in the election, as VMRO-DPMNE returned to power under Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, who had explicitly ruled out constitutional changes during his mandate, claiming there was no guarantee that Bulgaria would not block the country once again (Marušić, 2023). This leaves North Macedonia in a paradoxical position: several steps can be taken, but no proper integration can occur if the country continues to refuse constitutional amendments.

2.4 Diverging Accession Trajectories

Taken together, the accession trajectories of Serbia and North Macedonia illustrate both the achievements and the persisting challenges of the EU accession process. Serbia demonstrates a democratic trajectory marked by state capture and the dismantling of democratic institutions, despite more than a decade of EU presence and norm promotion, and billions of

euros in financial assistance. North Macedonia has undertaken substantial reforms across multiple frameworks. It has shown consistent commitment to EU integration, yet its progress has been repeatedly obstructed by bilateral disputes and member state vetoes.

3 Theoretical framework

The chapter is structured around three competing explanations that correspond with the study's hypotheses. First, it examines EU conditionality in a geopolitical context, focusing on a shift in the enlargement process toward a greater emphasis on strategic interests. Second, it addresses the role of domestic political elites as strategic actors who exploit or manipulate EU conditionality to maintain power while sustaining EU support. Third, it explores the concept of candidate state enlargement fatigue, which addresses how declining credibility and prolonged rewards and pressures can undermine domestic commitment and the effectiveness of EU leverage over time.

3.1 EU conditionality in the geopolitical context

A central theoretical account of how conditionality is operationalised and at its most affected is provided by Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier's (2004) *external incentives model*. This model argues that EU conditionality is most effective when four conditions are met. The four conditions are: 1: Determinacy of conditions, 2: Size and speed of rewards, 3: Credibility of EU promises, and 4: Domestic costs of adoption. The model assumes a merit-based enlargement process in which progress toward membership is based on compliance. (Manners, 2002, p.142).

However, scholars are increasingly arguing that the EU has shifted away from this value-based logic toward a more geopolitically driven approach. Anghel (2025) argues that the EU accession process has largely been transformed into a geopolitical tool, rather than the carrot-and-stick mechanism suggested by Schimmelfennig et al. (2004). Candidate states are increasingly valued for their strategic relevance or political alignment rather than their democratic performance. This shift is visible in debates over whether Ukraine should be able to fast-track its entry into the union, despite not meeting key reform criteria, due to its

geopolitical situation (Litra, 2026). This is argued to fundamentally undermine the incentive structure on which the external incentives model and the enlargement process depend. When membership prospects no longer depend on reform or dedication, conditionality becomes unreliable and unstable (Anghel, 2025).

This geopolitical shift has had tangible consequences for the Western Balkans, especially regarding democratic development. Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac (2021) argue that the EU itself has contributed to weak democratic foundations and institutions in the region by prioritising stability over fostering democracy. In practice, this has meant tolerating, or even consolidating, illiberal democracies that deliver regional stability, thereby allowing authoritarian tendencies and institutional weakening instead of challenging them. Rather than using conditionality to pressure governments toward democratisation, the EU has at times effectively rewarded stability, regardless of the democratic quality of the governments providing it. As a result, several countries in the Western Balkans have shifted toward autocratic tendencies, which are difficult to reverse.

3.2 Domestic political elite and strategic manipulation

Democratic backsliding can take multiple forms, many of which are deliberately engineered by the political elite; one such phenomenon is “elite capture”. Elite capture occurs when the political elite manipulates institutions and electoral processes to serve their own interests at the expense of democratic accountability and societal needs. One of the strategies used is “executive aggrandisement”, a system through which elected officials gradually erode institutional checks on executive authority. (Bermeo, 2016, p. 6-8). Another prominent mechanism of democratic backsliding is strategic election manipulation, which is often accompanied by executive aggrandisement. This strategy includes actions that are designed to tilt the electoral playing field in favour of the regime. Such measures may include obstructing voter registration, harassing political opponents, restricting access to the media, and other actions that undermine fair elections. These measures are carried out discreetly enough to preserve the outward appearance of legitimate elections and thereby avoid accusations of fraud (Bermeo, 2016, p. 14-15).

Democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans has likely been driven by these domestic tendencies: elite capture through executive aggrandisement and strategic election manipulation. There has also been a regional shift in which the political elite manipulate external actors through "**reversed conditionality**". Tzifakis & Vasdoka (2025) argue that the EU is losing its leverage to local elites, who exploit the vulnerabilities of the union for their own gain. These bargaining practices are used in an attempt to dilute the EU accession requirements. These tactics add a new layer of elite capture, which damages the EU's credibility, as the union continues to be steered by candidate states (Tzifakis & Vasdoka, 2025, p. 477; 485)

3.3 Enlargement fatigue

Enlargement fatigue is a consequence underscored by Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier's (2004) External Incentives Model (EIM). The model explains that compliance depends on the credibility of rewards: candidate states adopt EU rules only when the benefits of membership outweigh the domestic costs. Without credible rewards, reforms stagnate.

Based on this logic, scholars argue that the Western Balkans is experiencing enlargement fatigue due to the lack of credible membership prospects. Milenković (2024) argues that enlargement fatigue among the Western Balkan candidate countries is a result of distant membership prospects and has had a significant influence on legal and political reform in the region. Governments in the region have made significant efforts to align national legislation with the EU acquis. However, the lack of a tangible prospect of progress has reduced motivation to undertake difficult reforms. Rising popular criticism of the EU and the strict requirements of the enlargement have further undermined the transformative power of conditionality (Milenković, 2024)

Günay and Dzihic (2016) take this further, suggesting that the EU enlargement process has released enormous transformative forces. The authors argue that the loss of a realistic process of EU membership within a foreseeable future has not only led to a decline in political will, but has also been the catalyst for autocratisation (Günay & Dzihic, 2016, p.543).

3.4 Hypotheses

From the literature, we can extract competing hypotheses explaining how EU conditionality has constrained or enabled democratic backsliding in North Macedonia and Serbia, and why their trajectories have diverged.

The literature on EU conditionality highlights the EU's longstanding identity as a normative power, promoting democracy and human rights. However, recent literature suggests that the EU's value-based priorities have been eroded by a geopolitical turn. This leads us to the first hypothesis:

H1: In the geopolitical context of the past decade, the EU has shifted from a normative power promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, to a union that tolerates autocratisation in favour of stability. This shift has transformed the merit-based enlargement process into a political process, weakened the credibility of accession, and enabled democratic stagnation and backsliding in North Macedonia and Serbia.

The literature on elite capture explains how political elites manipulate institutions and electoral processes to serve their own interests through mechanisms such as executive aggrandisement. This leads us to the second hypothesis:

H2: Elite manipulation of conditionality has enabled domestic political actors in Serbia and North Macedonia to weaken the EU leverage by exploiting its vulnerabilities. This reversed conditionality has damaged the EU's credibility, allowing autocratisation to persist and contributed to democratic stagnation and backsliding in the countries.

The literature on enlargement fatigue explains that compliance depends on the credibility of rewards. The lack of membership prospects has led to enlargement fatigue, which has significantly slowed legal and political reform. This leads us to the third hypothesis:

H3: Enlargement fatigue, driven by the absence of tangible membership prospects within a foreseeable future, has eroded reform incentives in North Macedonia and Serbia. As the prospects for advancement have diminished, domestic actors' motivation to undertake difficult reforms has weakened. The loss of a realistic process of EU membership within the

foreseeable future has not only led to a decline in political will, but has also been the catalyst for autocratisation.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design

This research is designed as a diachronic comparative case study, constructed using a Most-Similar-Systems-Design (MSSD). This design selects similar cases to isolate political dynamics that explain divergent outcomes (Panke, 2018, p. 158; 238). The design assumes that observed differences in outcomes result from differing political dynamics rather than fundamentally different structural conditions. This makes MSSD the most suitable research design for the research question: *To what extent has EU conditionality constrained or enabled democratic backsliding in North Macedonia and Serbia, and why?*

EU progress reports have been analysed from 2008 through 2025, the most recent report available. The European Commission's progress report system evaluates candidate countries' alignment and advancement using a five-level preparedness scale: *early stage, some level of preparation, moderately prepared, good level of preparation, and well advanced*. For progress achieved during the reporting period, a six-level scale is applied: *backsliding, no progress, limited progress, some progress, good progress, and very good progress*.

Depending on what the hypothesis demands, the study takes analytical “snapshots” in each relevant year within a selected time frame. The five chapters selected for analysis are all situated within the Fundamentals Cluster or closely connected to governance and the rule of law, which are essential for democratisation. The chapters examined are: **Public Administration, Judiciary, Anti-corruption, Justice, Freedom and Security (JFS), and Public Procurement**.

This study, therefore, assumes the dependent variable (DV) as democratic outcomes in the respective countries, while the independent variable (IV) will differ depending on which hypothesis is being tested; where geopolitical shifts, elite manipulation, and enlargement fatigue stand as the IVs, the DV will be tested against.

4.2 Case selection

The selection of cases is mainly motivated by the country's similar political structures and shared historical legacies. They are both post-Yugoslav states and have been dealing with ethnic tensions, even in recent years. The two countries have also had decade-long, stalled EU accession processes, with compelling democratic developments that seem to mirror each other yet have developed differently (V-dem, 2025). The selected time frame is based on North Macedonia's EU candidacy in 2006 and Serbia's in 2012. However, starting in 2008 is crucial to understand North Macedonia's democratic development in the 2010s. The time frame is also long enough for the EU process to properly take form and showcase results, consequences, behavior, and shifts.

4.3 Research method

To confirm or reject any hypothesis, this study will employ a qualitative research approach by combining document analysis as the primary data source with process tracing as the main analytical method. This allows an examination of the relationship between democracy and EU enlargement in the selected cases. The combination of the selected methods will enable a systematic, causal analysis that aims to strengthen the study's internal validity.

Document in this analysis is therefore used to examine how EU conditionality is framed, justified, and applied – along with how domestic political actors have responded to EU demands, requirements, and incentives. The study focuses on identifying shifts in emphasis, language, and areas of inconsistency or tension that will aid in confirming or rejecting hypotheses. The documents referred to will be EU progress reports from the EU Commission between 2008 and 2026; this will be supported by local and global NGOs, who will cross-check data across all sources to arrive at valid and reliable conclusions.

This method will be used to identify the causal mechanism linking EU conditionality to domestic political behavior. This method is suitable, as it allows for a proper reconstruction of the sequence of events, which answers questions about how the EU applied conditionality, domestic elites' responses, and pinpoints exactly where leverage was weakened. Process tracing becomes suitable in the confirming/rejecting-hypothesis nature of this study, where the time frame is long enough for this method to unfold, examining how and why particular

outcomes occur in specific cases (Panke, 2018, p. 248). Describing it as opening the “black box” between dependent and independent variables, which is exactly what the study aims to do.

4.4 Data collection

The primary data sources for this study will be EU progress reports published by the European Commission for Serbia and North Macedonia, covering the period 2008-2026. Where both independent variables (geopolitical shifts, elite manipulation, and enlargement fatigue) and the dependent variable (democratic outcomes) are operationalised and traced over time. This will allow us to track how the EU has framed developments in democracy in these two countries over a selected period and identify moments when the language surrounding conditionality has shifted over time.

To complement the EU reports and provide a holistic overview of progress, the study will also draw on quantitative data, and civil society reports. The additional sources will act as a counterweight against possible biases and fully capture political behavior, potential elite motivation, and expressions of fatigue or frustration among the elite or the population. Together, they will support tracing changes in EU framing, domestic changes, and democratic outcomes over time.

4.5 Limitations

The study faces several limitations. Firstly, one could argue that the study's baseline is constrained by its selection of two cases with similar stagnation-accession trajectories. Montenegro or Bosnia and Herzegovina could also have been included in the comparison due to their post-Yugoslav legacies. Croatia, a fully fledged member state, could also have been used as a comparison. However, Serbia and North Macedonia both work well for this case study as they allow for a meaningful comparison under contemporary political conditions, their prolonged accession processes becoming key here. The study does not aim to explain democratization in post-Yugoslav states in general, but rather to analyze the functioning of EU conditionality under conditions of extended and uncertain enlargement.

Secondly, the study is heavily dependent on official EU documents, which reflect institutional interests, strategic considerations, or diplomatic caution. EU reports are not neutral sources of information and may reflect biases. To mitigate this bias, the study will triangulate CSO reporting with CSOs' reports, thereby making the study more secure (Panke, 2018, p. 202).

Finally, process tracing strengthens causal mechanisms but unfortunately does not provide definitive proof of causality. The method is still credible for identifying plausible causal mechanisms; alternative explanations cannot be completely ruled out. It is important to be aware of this and address it through a careful case comparison and transparent analytical procedures.

4.6 Data analysis

Data analysis follows a theory-guided qualitative approach. Documents were read systematically and analysed in relation to the study's three hypotheses. Rather than applying formal coding associated with content analysis, the analysis focused on identifying patterns, shifts in framing, and critical shifts relevant to EU conditionality and democratic outcomes.

5 Analysis

5.1 Geopolitical shifts and the impact on EU conditionality

The last decade has been marked by geopolitical crises that have majorly affected Europe. From Russia's annexation of Crimea to Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU has been forced to confront both internal and external challenges.

5.1.1 Serbia

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Serbia got caught in the crossfire of growing geopolitical rivalries. According to Ejodus (2025), Serbia is particularly vulnerable in its balancing act: while maintaining strategic partnerships with Russia and China, who support Serbia's territorial integrity, it simultaneously pursues EU membership, where the union backs the slow-motion secessions on Kosovo (Ejodus, 2025, p.64).

Ejdus (2025) further suggests that the geopolitical challenges have led the EU to prioritise the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo over democratic transition within Serbia. A striking example is the municipal elections in Kosovo in November 2013, when masked thugs stormed the key polling station in Kosovska Mitrovica to invalidate the vote after a low turnout. When the elections were rerun, the regime coerced Kosovo Serbs into supporting the Belgrade-sponsored Srpska Lista, thereby securing legitimacy for the process. The EU turned a blind eye to these undemocratic methods, as long as they delivered stability in the region during times of uncertainty (Ejdus, 2025, p.66). A similar dynamic was evident when elections were held in Serbia in December 2023 and June 2024. International and domestic observers declared them neither free nor fair. Initially, Germany voiced strong criticism of the rigged elections. In July 2024, however, this criticism was muted when President Vučić and Chancellor Scholz signed a cooperation agreement granting the EU access to Serbia's lithium reserves (Ejdus, 2025, p.66). An important resource in the geopolitical context as the access to it makes the EU less dependent on China. Democratic backsliding was deprioritized once an opportunity to secure stability presented itself.

The perception of the EU as a geopolitical actor, favouring stability over democratisation is prominent in public opinion data as well. The Centre for European Policy's 2026 report on Geopolitics and EU Values shows that a substantial share of Serbian citizens expresses skepticism about the EU's intentions with the enlargement process. 41,6% of respondents believe that the EU is primarily pursuing its own political and economic interests in the region, rather than strengthening democracy and the rule of law. Similarly, 43,9% of citizens believe that it is more important for the EU that Serbia imposes sanctions on Russia than for it to become a developed democracy (Centre for European Policy, 2026, p.3). These figures suggest that the EU has failed to maintain its credibility as a values-based transformative power, resulting in the loss of leverage and credibility in Serbia.

The EU progress reports from 2019 to 2025 further showcase the EU's hesitation to acknowledge the backsliding in Serbia. Despite Serbia's dramatic democratic backsliding recorded by V-dem, the reports rarely mention "backsliding", using the term 0-2 times per year. The 2025 report acknowledges the Novi Sad train station canopy collapse and the following mass protests over corruption and accountability. Although it mentions the excessive use of force against protestors, it leaves out police brutality, sound cannons, and

other acts of violence inflicted by the government. The report notes the increasing use of spyware and SLAPP lawsuits against journalists and civil society, but the language remains muted. While these signs of democratic backsliding are mentioned in the reports, the only recurring use of the term “backsliding” is in relation to Serbia's Dialogue obligations on Kosovo (European Commission, 2019; 2020c; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025a). The selective use of terminology could be a rhetorical strategy, applying stronger language to issues framed as regional security concerns, while domestic democratic backsliding is downplayed.

This dynamic supports Hypothesis 1. The EU’s credibility as a normative power has eroded in Serbia. Geopolitical interests and stability, whether in Kosovo, independence from China or sanctions on Russia, have been priorities over democracy. Hence, **the EU’s lack of response to the democratic backsliding in Serbia has undermined conditionality and enabled its continuation.**

5.1.2 North Macedonia

Prior to major geopolitical shifts, the EU relied on cautious monitoring rather than concrete pressure in North Macedonia. The 2010 progress report documented opposition boycotts, judicial weakness, and corruption as a "serious problem," with “limited progress,” yet assessed the country as requiring only "additional efforts" (European Commission, 2010). North Macedonia's LDI score of 0.37 in 2010 reflects a fragile but functioning democracy (V-Dem, 2025).

Russia's aggression toward Ukraine in 2014 did not visibly alter EU conditionality language toward North Macedonia. The 2014 report remained diplomatically cautious, noting that "inter-ethnic tension hinders constructive political dialogue" despite significant deterioration in democracy (European Commission, 2014a). The LDI declined to 0.28 in 2014, reflecting measurable democratic backsliding (V-Dem, 2025). The EU response was limited. This period overlaps with the Gruevski era of democratic backsliding, as documented in the EU progress reports (2014a; 2015a). However, the EU continued to favor diplomatic, cautious language over direct intervention. This absence of stronger EU pressure during this period is consistent with H1’s logic of neglect.

The strongest empirical challenge to H1 appears in the 2018 Prespa Agreement, where conditionality was demonstrated to be functioning. This costly constitutional reform was

undertaken, rewarded with NATO membership, and opened accession negotiations. The 2018 report assessed "substantial improvement" in civil society and democratic governance (European Commission, 2018, p. 12-13). LDI improved to 0.39, confirming the democratic consolidation (V-Dem, 2025). However, this reward proved fragile. Bulgaria's subsequent veto introduced demands concerning minority rights entirely outside the Copenhagen criteria, and the French proposal of 2022 institutionalised these demands into the negotiating framework, a move the European Parliament itself described as a "concerning precedent" (European Parliament, 2025, p. 21). North Macedonia scored 0.37 in 2022, near-identical to the 2010 baseline, signifying stagnation despite reform (V-Dem, 2025). The fact that North Macedonia ended up in the same democratic position twelve years later signifies the EU's limited credibility. Even when conditionality produces reform, the EU is unable to follow through with credible rewards, destabilizing the enlargement process.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that H1 functions less as a direct explanation for North Macedonia's democratic trajectory and acts as a structural backdrop. However, it paints a picture of **the EU as neglectful**, a trend especially prominent in the years following the Prespa Agreement. This suggests institutional fragmentation at the EU level, which leads to a failure to deliver credible accession prospects. The geopolitical mechanism that H1 suggests may be real, but the neglect that follows is the most relevant evidence in North Macedonia's case.

5.2 Elite capture and reversed conditionality

According to Tzifakis & Vasdoka (2025), the EU is losing its leverage over domestic political elites through the exploitation of the Union's vulnerabilities (p. 477). In this chapter, we will analyse the cases through the lens of the hypothesis that elite capture and reversed conditionality have led to democratic backsliding and stagnation in Serbia and North Macedonia.

5.2.1 Serbia

This section examines how the dynamics of elite capture are visible in Serbia and whether they extend to the EU level through reversed conditionality. Specifically, how Serbia's political elite strategically manipulates EU conditionality, weakening its capacity to constrain democratic backsliding.

First, it is necessary to establish that Serbia is experiencing elite capture. As outlined in the theoretical framework, common strategies include executive aggrandisement and strategic election manipulation, both of which are clearly present in Serbia. Under Vučić and the SNS, **executive aggrandisement** has increased. Vučić was elected legitimately as President in 2014 but gradually and strategically centralized power to himself, in ways characteristic of executive aggrandisement. Simultaneously, the SNS manipulated institutions to its own advantage. A recent example is the “Mrđić laws”. By curtailing the independence of courts and prosecutors, these reforms undermine judicial autonomy. The process was quick, and only days after prosecutors had pursued corruption charges against prominent SNS ministers (European Western Balkans, 2026). This case is one of many in Serbia where the SNS has reshaped institutions for its own benefit. The SNS state capture is also visible in the V-Dem statistics. The SNS came to power in 2012, the same year the dramatic curve of democratic backsliding began. Serbia’s Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) dropped from **0.5 to 0.2** within a decade (Nord et al., 2026, p. 23), illustrating the depth of institutional erosion under the SNS.

Strategic election manipulation in Serbia has been documented by the “Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability” (CRTA). In its observation mission of 2025, CRTA reported 71 incidents of intimidation, 90 appearances of government officials supporting the ruling party campaign, and 70 instances of misleading political advertising favouring the ruling party. CRTA also reported other pre-election engineering techniques, e.g., phantom lists (CRTA, 2025). This suggests that the SNS frequently uses strategic election manipulation in Serbia.

After establishing that elite capture is present in Serbia, the next question is whether this elite capture also affects Serbia’s relationship with the EU. Tzifakis & Vasdoka (2025) argue that reversed conditionality occurs when candidate states exploit the EU’s vulnerabilities (p.477). In the past decade, the EU has increasingly prioritised stability, particularly in light of Russia’s aggressions. Against this backdrop, signaling closer ties to Russia becomes an effective strategy for domestic elites to manipulate these insecurities.

The 2025 EU progress report highlights the European Commission’s concerns over Serbia’s intensified bilateral contacts with Russia. Although Serbia aligned retroactively with several Council decisions and EU statements, e.g., condemning Russia’s actions, it refuses to join EU sanctions on Russia. The country’s high-level and bilateral contacts with Russia are intensifying, including Vučić’s attendance at the 9 May 2025 military parade in Moscow.

Simultaneously, Serbia has balanced this position by improving its relationship with Ukraine, providing humanitarian support, and reaffirming its support for Ukrainian sovereignty during Vučić's official visit to Odessa in June 2025. These contradicting actions caused the European Commission to raise questions regarding Serbia's strategic directions (European Commission, 2025a, p. 20, 71).

This balancing act is likely a mechanism of elite manipulation of EU conditionality. Ejodus (2025) argues that Serbian political elites actively foster ties with non-Western actors, viewing them as an alternative source of political support that enhances their ability to resist EU demands for democratic reforms. The Russian influence is therefore not imposed nor driven by genuine amity but pragmatism of local elites. One example of this is the case of the fraudulent elections of 2023, when Germany and the European Parliament criticized Serbia, the Serbian government immediately tilted towards Moscow and a partnership with the Russian intelligence services (Ejodus, 2025, p. 67).

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Serbia is using its balancing act between the EU and Russia to strengthen its bargaining position. By demonstrating that it is not dependent on the EU, Serbia reduces the EU's ability to impose stricter conditionality in fear of a response from the country involving further alignment with Moscow. This allows the democratic backsliding to continue with limited consequences. This proves Hypothesis 2: **Elite manipulation of EU conditionality has enabled domestic political actors in Serbia to weaken the EU leverage by exploiting its vulnerabilities.**

5.2.2 North Macedonia

This section aims to assess the behavior of North Macedonia's political elites in relation to the EU. The main goal is to assess whether the behavior is sufficiently strategic or manipulative to constitute reversed conditionality.

Between 2008 and 2015, VMRO-DPMNE, led by Gruevski, executed a textbook example of democratic backsliding. By establishing control of the judiciary and the media, the country transformed from a semi-consolidated democracy into a semi-authoritarian one in under a decade (Armakolas & Krstinovska, 2025, p. 4). The methods used align with Bermeo's (2016) mechanisms of executive aggrandisement, in which elected officials gradually erode institutional checks through legal reforms rather than violent actions. EU progress reports

between 2008 and 2014 confirm this deterioration in detail; 2008 exemplifies through organised violence and ballot stuffing observed by OSCE/ODIHR; the 2010 reports notes that VMRO-DPMNE parliamentarians actively attacked the Constitutional Court; the 2011 report describes a parliamentary oppositional boycott that allowed the coalition to pass 200+ laws without parliamentary checks; and by 2014 the EU notes that North Macedonia has “serious concerns about government seizing control over public institutions and media” also noting that this has been “apparent in the last years reports” (EU commission, 2008; 2010; 2011; 2014b) This pattern of documented democratic backsliding without concrete EU response and cautious language made the EU structurally complicit in North Macedonia's democratic decay (Armakolas & Krstinovska, 2025, p. 9)

Gruevski's policies were described as neoconservative and US-inspired in his early rule, and North Macedonia was granted candidate status for NATO at the 2008 Bucharest summit, a move that Greece firmly blocked. This sparked outrage in Skopje and contributed to Gruevski's ideological shift toward closer ties with Russia. However, he never fully committed to this eastern pivot. Described as a “political chameleon,” his shifts in policy were opportunistic rather than strategic, and VMRO-DPMNE's fundamental pro-Western orientation never dissolved (Petsinis, 2015). This is exemplified through North Macedonia’s voting against Russia's aggression of Ukraine in 2014, at the height of Gruevski’s rule (United Nations General Assembly, 2014) and joining EU sanctions in 2022 (European Western Balkans, 2022b) Crucially, North Macedonia lacked the geopolitical weight to leverage the EU, which is why reverse conditionality never occurred here.

The EU’s passive behavior only ended when the crisis was at its peak. The 2015 report described the political situation as the “worst crisis in the country since 2001,” using the term “backsliding” for the first time, and triggered the Urgent Reform Priorities framework (European Commission, 2015a, p. 4, 7–10). The EU intervention that followed was the US-supported Pržino Agreement, which required constant EU and US support to fulfill its goals, but several points were left unfulfilled, which the EU attributed to a lack of political will (European Commission, 2016a, p. 6). It did, however, produce results: leading to the 2017 power transfer to Zaev’s government, the Prespa Agreement in 2018, and NATO membership in 2020, which together represent a rare case of conditionality functioning, albeit belatedly. This also led to the country straying further away from Russia, ending up on Russia’s so-called “list of enemies” (Kajosevic, 2022) V-dem confirms this from 0.27 at the

peak of the crisis in 2015, to showcasing a democratic recovery with a 0.4 ranking by 2020 (V-dem, 2025).

VMRO-DPMNE's return under Mickoski in 2024 does not fully revive elite-capture dynamics. Instead, he opposes the French Proposal's institutional demands, which instead reflect opposition rather than strategic manipulation of the EU's vulnerabilities. Mickoski's rule does not match the level of executive aggrandisement that Gruevski's conducted.

H2 is in the case of North Macedonia, both confirmed and rejected. Elite capture did occur and was partly enabled by the EU's passivity, but it was able to bounce back with EU support, demonstrating that conditionality can function when applied consistently. But reversed conditionality finds no empirical support here; North Macedonia never developed the geopolitical leverage needed to pursue it, given its clear alignment with the EU and NATO.

5.3 Enlargement fatigue and its domestic consequences

5.3.1 Serbia

In order to follow Serbia's willingness to democratise and its implementation of EU policies, EU progress reports have been analysed from 2012, the year Serbia was granted official candidate status, through 2025, the most recent report available.

Across the five chapters mentioned in 4.1, the trajectory reveals a common pattern. **Public Administration** reform began slowly in 2012, reaching "good progress" and a "moderate level" by 2016. By 2019, progress had stagnated to only "limited progress"; by 2024-2025, "no progress" was recorded. **Public Procurement** shows a similar pattern, with "some progress" in 2012, "good progress" in 2014, and thereafter, pending, between "limited progress" and "no progress". **Anti-Corruption** was constantly weak, with "little progress" between 2012 and 2016, some improvements in 2019, and then stagnating at "limited progress" in 2021, 2023, and 2025. **JSF** showed optimism in the early years, with gradual improvements, but never advancing beyond "some" or "limited progress". In 2024, "moderate preparedness" was achieved, only to regress to "limited progress" in 2025. **Judiciary** had a slow but steady progress in the early years, going from "little progress" to "some progress" between 2012-2016, but then stagnating on "limited progress" 2019 and 2021 and 2024, and "no progress" by 2025 (European Commission, 2012; 2014b; 2016b; 2019; 2021; 2023; 2024;

2025a). The progress report for 2026 is not yet finalised but the situation in the judiciary has acutely worsened as of January 2026, when the government introduced the so-called “Mrđić laws”. In an urgent opinion, the Venice Commission has concluded that the laws undermine judicial independence and prosecutorial autonomy (European Western Balkans, 2026), suggesting further degradation in this area.

Taken together, these trajectories demonstrate a clear trend: during the first decade of Serbia's EU candidacy, slow but steady progress created an impression of optimism and alignment with EU policies. Since 2021, however, “limited progress” has dominated the reports, with “no progress” being increasingly common. This pattern indicates that the political will to implement EU reforms was present during the early years but cooled significantly in the last five years. This could suggest that the lack of credible movement toward EU membership has weakened optimism and reduced reform ambitions and political will among Serbia's political elites, which could be interpreted as symptoms of enlargement fatigue.

While the implementation of the reforms demonstrate stagnation in EU alignments, contradictory public opinion surveys reveal improvements in societal attitudes towards the EU. In 2015, only 24% of Serbian citizens believed that EU membership would be good for the national economy. By 2024, this figure had increased to 34%, indicating a slow but steady rise in societal optimism towards the EU, with growing expectations that membership would benefit the national economy (Regional Cooperation Council, 2015; 2024). This trend contrasts with the stagnation observed in the progress reports. This indicates that *if* there is enlargement fatigue in Serbia, it is elite-driven, as societal support for the EU is increasing while institutional support has stalled.

Based on the stagnation in political reform evident in the progress reports, which appears to be elite-driven, one could assume that Serbia's democratic backsliding is a consequence of enlargement fatigue. However, this interpretation is missing one puzzle piece: the statistics from the V-Dem dataset, presented in the background. According to Nord et al. (2026), some democratic stagnation in Serbia was already evident in 2009, but the most dramatic backsliding began in 2012, with a significant decline in the LDI between 2012 and 2025 (Nord et al., 2026, p. 23). Serbia became an official candidate country in 2012, with accession negotiations opening in 2013. Since the first sharp decline in democratic performance was recorded between 2012 and 2013, it is unlikely that enlargement fatigue can explain Serbia's

democratic backsliding at this early stage. The country had not yet been a candidate long enough to experience fatigue.

This suggests that **Serbia's democratic backsliding is not a product of enlargement fatigue**. While it may help explain the stagnation and lack of progress observed in later years, particularly after 2021, the initial drop in democracy occurred during the very beginning of Serbia's candidacy, which would point to something else being the driver of the democratic backsliding in the country. Enlargement fatigue may therefore be a reinforcing factor in a country already suffering from democratic backsliding, but it is not the original cause.

5.3.2 North Macedonia

To assess enlargement fatigue in North Macedonia, this analysis considers two dimensions: the credibility of EU rewards relative to reform efforts, and the domestic consequences of prolonged accession stagnation, as reflected in public trust and political behavior. The fatigue here is not independent of H1 and H2; it is partly their consequence.

North Macedonia's reform record is empirically strong. The power transfer of 2017 led to the name change from FYROM to North Macedonia and NATO membership in 2020. The 2018 EU progress report assessed that "democratic governance has improved," that the country had "shown political will to advance in the reform agenda," and that "civil society has substantially improved" (European Commission, 2018, p. 12, 13, 18). This trajectory is visible in V-Dem's LDI, which improved from 0.27 in 2015 to 0.4 by 2020, reflecting genuine democratic improvement (V-Dem, 2025).

As the external incentives model suggests, such reform should produce a reward. Instead, the French proposal incorporated Bulgaria's demands entirely outside the Copenhagen criteria into North Macedonia's negotiating framework; this is the clearest example of moving the goalposts. The consequences are concrete: no government since 2022 has been able or willing to implement the demanded constitutional amendment. Approximately 65% of citizens oppose the amendment (Atlantic Council, 2024). When compliance carries high domestic costs but no credible reward, even reform-oriented actors cannot deliver.

The consequences are measurable across both elites and citizens. Democratic support declined from 61% in 2021 to 48% in 2024. Trust in government stands at just 17%, which is the lowest in the region (BTI, 2026, p. 18). The opinion on EU progress is fairly mixed among

Macedonian citizens: 27% believe EU accession will never happen, the second-highest “never” response in the region after Serbia's 35%. Despite this, 51% believe that EU membership would be beneficial for the country (Regional Cooperation Council 2024, p 13).

VMRO-DPMNE's 2024 transfer to power was built on voter frustration with slow EU integration (Atlantic Council, 2024). Fatigue afflicts both elites and citizens: elites reject costly reforms without credible rewards, and citizens have lost faith in the process itself. As Milenković (2024) argues, distant membership prospects reduce reform motivation across the Western Balkans, and North Macedonia illustrates this as its fatigue is structurally imposed from the EU rather than self-inflicted. **North Macedonia never truly abandoned the reform path, it was structurally blocked regardless of effort.**

5.4 Comparative assessment: diverging trajectories under similar conditions

This section compares the findings from the two cases and explains why Serbia and North Macedonia have developed different trajectories. The Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) illustrates this divergence clearly. In the 2010s, North Macedonia experienced a democratic decline worse than Serbia's, placing below Serbia in the LDI rankings. The two countries have exchanged places in the ranking and continue to diverge, with Serbia's ongoing trend of democratic backsliding and North Macedonia's continued stagnation, with no dramatic changes since its peak of 0.4 in 2020 (V-dem, 2025).

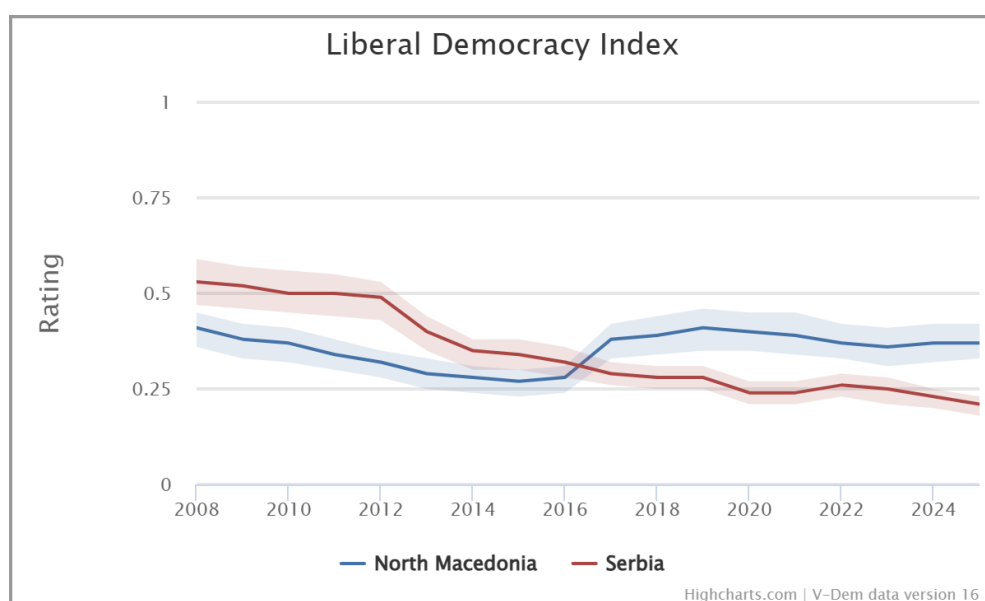


Figure 1, V-dem Liberal Democracy Index 2008-2025. Source: V-Dem: 2025

The purpose of this comparative assessment is to explain why these developments occurred by applying the three hypotheses to the cases. By doing so, we aim to identify which mechanism: Geopolitics, Elite Capture, or Enlargement fatigue, is the most suitable explanation for each country's trajectory.

5.4.1 Hypothesis 1: Geopolitical shifts

H1 assumes that EU accession is happening through a top-down power dynamic, in which the EU holds the leverage and candidate states respond to its priorities. In the geopolitical context of the past decade, this dynamic has been reshaped by the EU's preoccupation with external crises, including Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Brexit. As a result, the Western Balkans has received less political attention, leading to democratic decay enabled by neglect. This pattern is visible both in Serbia and North Macedonia, but manifests differently. In Serbia, reduced EU attention has allowed democratic backsliding to escalate, while in North Macedonia, the same neglect has rather contributed to democratic stagnation.

The EU has repeatedly downplayed democratic backsliding in Serbia, mostly applying the term "backsliding" to Kosovo-related obligations rather than to the erosion of democratic institutions (European Commission, 2019; 2020c; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025a). This reluctance to intervene reflects a hesitation to confront Belgrade, driven by the EU's priority of maintaining regional stability. The 2024 lithium cooperation agreement between Scholz and Vučić further illustrates this tendency, with Germany's criticism of Serbia's fraudulent elections muted after the EU was offered access to lithium reserves, reinforcing the idea that stability outweighs democratic concerns (Ejdus, 2025).

A similar pattern was observed in North Macedonia prior to 2015. During the Gruevski era, the EU mostly functioned as a monitor rather than actively enforcing democratic standards, keeping its rhetoric muted despite clear signs of media capture and control of the judiciary. Scholars argue that the EU's passivity contributed to deepening the crisis (Armakolas & Krstinovska, 2025, p. 4). The EU only interfered when the situation escalated in 2015. In this sense, the trajectory Serbia is experiencing today mirrors North Macedonia's previous decline. The EU's passivity, reflected in the integration demands of Greece and Bulgaria, is also

identified as a main driver of democratic stagnation in North Macedonia. In both cases, the EU's neglect allowed democratic decay.

Taken together, the evidence shows that H1 provides the structural foundations for democratic stagnation in North Macedonia and democratic backsliding in Serbia. The EU's shift toward geopolitical priorities has weakened the credibility of the accession process and reduced its prioritisation of democratic values. In both cases, **the EU's passivity has contributed to the decay of democratic conditions**, though with differentiating outcomes: democratic stagnation in North Macedonia and accelerated democratic backsliding in Serbia.

5.4.2 Hypothesis 2: Elite capture and reversed conditionality

The context of H1 creates the conditions for H2; however, H2 reflects the opposite power dynamic: a bottom-up process in which domestic elites exploit geopolitical uncertainty to manipulate the EU. Under this dynamic, elites balance between the EU and alternative partnerships, notably Russia, alternating between promises of stability and implicit threats of instability. Due to the fear of losing influence in these countries, the EU hesitates to enforce conditionality. The result is an inverted power relationship, in which candidate states hold the leverage and the EU loses its capacity to constrain democratic backsliding.

Of the two cases, Serbia has the strongest empirical evidence for this dynamic. The SNS government has systematically captured power through executive aggrandisement and strategic election manipulation; simultaneously, they have signalled alignments with Russia. Serbia's bilateral contact with the country, its refusal to join EU sanctions, and Vučić's visit to Moscow effectively play on the EU's fear of Russian influence in the Western Balkans. This fear discourages the union from imposing stricter conditionality. Through this behavior, the domestic elites of Serbia shape EU behaviour, not the other way around.

In contrast, this bottom-up dynamic did not develop in North Macedonia. Although elite capture was prominent during the Gruevski era, he attempted to signal alternative alignments with Russia. We argue that this rhetoric was not credible and that North Macedonia lacks the leverage to manipulate the EU. The EU is confident in North Macedonia's alignment with the Western bloc, a loyalty they have repeatedly proved recurrently: North Macedonia's early dedication toward the EU and NATO, exemplified by voting in line with the EU against

Russia in 2014, joining the EU's sanctions against Russia, and ending up on Russia's "enemy list" (Kajosevic, 2022) Lastly, the NATO membership solidifies North Macedonia's alignment with the West, leaving it without any credibility in threats of partnerships with Russia. Hence, North Macedonia **does not have the political leverage** that Serbia possesses to successfully apply reversed conditionality.

Taken together, the evidence for H2 shows that reversed conditionality emerges only when domestic elites possess credible geopolitical leverage. Serbia's ability to balance between the EU and Russia has given it an effective way of manipulating the EU's vulnerabilities, reversing conditionality, and discouraging the EU from imposing stricter conditionality. North Macedonia, in contrast, lacks the credibility and geopolitical alternatives necessary to threaten the EU. Therefore, elite capture in North Macedonia never evolved into a form of reversed conditionality. **H2 is hence strongly supported in the case of Serbia, but not in North Macedonia.**

5.4.3 Hypothesis 3: Enlargement Fatigue

Both countries could be argued to display symptoms of enlargement fatigue, but the drivers behind it differ fundamentally. Fatigue is elite-driven: public support for EU membership has gradually increased, but reform has stagnated. However, fatigue cannot be the main driver of this, as the backsliding began before the country became an EU candidate state, as illustrated by the 2008 Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem, 2025). This presents the argument that enlargement fatigue is not the primary cause of Serbia's democratic decay, but becomes a reinforcing factor of a process already underway.

North Macedonia displays the strongest evidence for enlargement fatigue through the accession process itself. Despite significant reforms, including a politically costly name change and sustained reform commitments, the country has received no credible rewards for its efforts, and membership still appears far away. The French Proposal, which presented a constitutional stalemate, where 65% of citizens oppose the required change, and no government has been able to deliver it, displays that the EU demands have become politicized (Atlantic Council, 2024). The absence of tangible membership prospects has eroded political will and domestic reform incentives. Despite the country's NATO membership and EU alignment, it will not be able to proceed further if it does not adopt the French Proposal,

resulting in a lack of advancement in the EU accession process, a lack of political will, and stagnating democratic development.

This is not the case in Serbia. Although stagnation in the adoption of EU policy reforms has slowed in recent years, similar to developments in North Macedonia, which could be interpreted as conditionality fatigue, we assess that it is not the driving force but rather a reinforcing one. Serbia's democratic backsliding started before the country started its EU accession, and hence, conditionality fatigue is not the reason.

H3 is therefore confirmed in North Macedonia, but partially rejected in Serbia. North Macedonia has lost a realistic roadmap and timeframe for EU membership, as the government continues to reject the constitutional demands, which are unpopular with the population. **The lack of political will and democratic stagnation in North Macedonia therefore result from a flawed accession process.** For Serbia, Fatigue appears to be enforcing democratic backsliding rather than being a direct driver behind it.

6 Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate the extent to which EU conditionality has constrained or enabled democratic backsliding in North Macedonia and Serbia, and why their trajectories have diverged despite their shared history and similar conditions. Through a Most-Similar-Systems-Design, combining document analysis and process tracing across EU progress reports and supplementary sources between 2008 and 2026, the analysis has aimed to answer the research question: *To what extent has EU conditionality constrained or enabled democratic backsliding in North Macedonia and Serbia, and why?* The study examined the research question through the lens of three hypotheses: Geopolitical dynamics (H1), Elite capture and reversed conditionality (H2), and Enlargement fatigue (H3).

The analysis demonstrates that **Hypothesis 2** provides the strongest explanation of Serbia's democratic backsliding. Serbia's political elite has strategically exploited the EU's vulnerabilities by balancing between the EU and Russia, signaling both cooperation and implicit threats of insecurity. The result is an inverted power dynamic in which Serbia holds

the leverage, rather than the EU. As a result, the EU's ability to apply conditionality has been significantly weakened, enabling the continuation of democratic erosion in Serbia.

In the case of North Macedonia, **Hypothesis 3** provides the strongest explanation of the country's democratic stagnation. Despite undertaking significant reforms and aligning consistently with the EU, North Macedonia has not received credible progress toward membership. The absence of tangible prospects for membership in the foreseeable future has eroded political will, turning EU reform into costly commitments with little domestic payoff. Enlargement fatigue has therefore stalled developments in the country, explaining the democratic stagnation.

However, none of these developments would have unfolded in the same way without the broader geopolitical context of the past decade and the EU's passivity. The union's neglect, driven by external crises and shifting strategic priorities, created the conditions for both democratic stagnation in North Macedonia and democratic backsliding in Serbia to take root. Therefore, **Hypothesis 1** provides the structural foundation in which these developments were allowed to emerge.

From this research, three overarching conclusions can be drawn:

First, the EU has enabled democratic backsliding in Serbia and democratic stagnation in North Macedonia by shifting its priorities from democratic values to geopolitical stability. The only major exception is the EU's intervention during the political crises in North Macedonia in 2015, an intervention unlikely to be mirrored in Serbia as long as its political elite possesses the leverage to reverse conditionality. The limited progress North Macedonia achieved after 2015 was undermined by the blockage of the French proposal, reinforcing the effects of enlargement fatigue.

Second, the EU has lost significant leverage over the accession process, both to domestic elites and to its own member states. In Serbia, reversed conditionality has allowed political elites to shape EU behaviour. In North Macedonia, member-state vetoes have transformed EU enlargement into a hostage to bilateral disputes. This has weakened the credibility of conditionality and undermined the EU's transformative power.

Third, the EU must rebuild its credibility and regain control over the enlargement process to constrain democratic decay in the Western Balkans. This requires ridding the accession process of bilateral disputes, applying conditionality consistently, even at the risk of political backlash, and restoring a clear, fair, and predictable pathway to membership. Without such reforms, the EU faces the risk of continued democratic stagnation and backsliding in its candidate countries.

For future research, it would be beneficial to further incorporate components of conflict dynamics and reconciliation. We would also propose a deeper analysis of war trauma in both countries and its potential effects on the EU accession process. This is relevant to Serbia, regarding the sanctions, and the NATO bombing of the cities and infrastructure in 1999. It is also relevant with regard to North Macedonia's interethnic conflicts, which influence the country's political process. Despite the country not being in the Yugoslav War, it is still heavily influenced by the 2001 conflict and the OFA, which is consistently referenced in every progress report during the period, whereas this thesis only mentions it sporadically.

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