

Shifting Tides: An Analysis of Declining Public and Youth Support for EU Accession in the Western Balkans (as of May 2025)

By DRAGAN TILEV¹



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¹ MSc Dragan Tilev, Expert in European Integration with 30+ years of experience in different countries.
Note: The analysis expresses the views of the author and does not necessarily represent the stance of Strategers.



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1. Executive Summary

This is a comprehensive analysis of public and youth sentiment towards the European Union (EU) accession process in the Western Balkan countries as of May 2025. The findings indicate a discernible trend of **declining support**, particularly pronounced **among the younger generation**, which poses significant challenges to the efficacy of the EU's enlargement policy. While overall trust in the EU remains above 50% in most Western Balkan nations, a notable decrease in the belief that EU membership would yield tangible economic benefits is observed. **Serbia** stands out with consistently low levels of public trust and support.

The analysis reveals that **youth in North Macedonia** exhibit less enthusiasm for EU membership, with a substantial portion expressing reluctance to participate in a hypothetical referendum. Similarly, **young people in Serbia** display heightened indecisiveness regarding EU integration. A critical factor contributing to this disillusionment is the widespread concern over emigration and brain drain, as many young individuals perceive that EU accession may not sufficiently address the underlying issues driving their desire to leave their home countries.

The erosion of public support is attributed to a complex interplay of economic, political, and geopolitical factors. Economic concerns, including high living costs, low wages, and persistent unemployment, temper expectations of material gains from EU integration. Politically, perceptions of national governance, particularly regarding the rule of law and corruption, significantly influence attitudes towards the EU. Furthermore, **prolonged accession delays stemming from unresolved bilateral disputes and the perceived inconsistency of the merit-based process contribute to reform fatigue and skepticism.** The EU's renewed geopolitical impetus for enlargement, while strategically vital, creates a delicate balance, as it risks de-emphasizing rigorous reform in favor of rapid integration, potentially undermining the process's long-term credibility. The success of new financial instruments, such as the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, in delivering tangible improvements will be critical in re-engaging populations and fostering genuine, sustainable reforms.

2. Introduction: The Western Balkans and the EU Accession Process

The integration of the Western Balkan countries into the European Union has long been a cornerstone of the EU's foreign policy, formalized through the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) launched in 1999. This strategic framework aims to facilitate the gradual rapprochement of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia with the EU through bilateral contractual relations, financial assistance, political dialogue, trade, and regional cooperation. The EU views enlargement as a profound geopolitical investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity across the continent, extending its zone of influence and shared values. The strategic imperative behind this commitment is evident in the EU's explicit framing of enlargement as a "geo-strategic investment". This underscores that the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans is not solely contingent on the candidate countries' readiness but also on broader security and influence considerations, particularly in light of the increasing presence of external

actors such as Russia and China in the region. However, this strategic urgency often encounters inherent challenges within the Western Balkans, including pervasive corruption, political instability, and unresolved bilateral disputes. These internal impediments directly complicate the achievement of the EU's strategic objectives, creating a tension between the geopolitical imperative for rapid integration and the slow, rigorous, merit-based nature of the accession process. This suggests that while the EU is driven by strategic considerations to integrate the region, the practical implementation remains constrained by the strict accession criteria and the political will of both the EU Member States and the candidate countries.

As of May 2025, the accession status of the Western Balkan countries presents a varied picture:

- **North Macedonia:** *Applied in 2004* and gained *candidate status in 2005*. Accession negotiations formally opened in July 2022, following years of delays due to a name dispute with Greece (resolved in 2019) and subsequent issues with Bulgaria. Although screening sessions for all six negotiating clusters were completed by December 2023, no clusters or chapters have been formally opened yet.
- **Montenegro:** *Applied for EU membership in 2008*, received *candidate status in 2010*, and opened accession negotiations in June 2012. All 33 negotiating chapters have been opened, with six provisionally closed. While political turmoil has previously stalled its integration, noteworthy progress was observed in 2024, including the provisional closing of three negotiating chapters.
- **Serbia:** Submitted its *application in 2009* and received *candidate status in 2012*. Accession negotiations formally opened in January 2014. To date, 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters have been opened, with two provisionally closed. No new chapters or clusters have been opened since December 2021. Serbia's EU integration remains closely tied to the EU-facilitated dialogue with Kosovo, aiming for a legally binding comprehensive agreement.
- **Albania:** *Applied in 2009*, gained *candidate status in 2014*, and formally opened accession negotiations in July 2022. By April 2025, Albania had opened 16 out of 33 negotiating chapters across Clusters 1 (Fundamentals), 2 (Internal Market), and 6 (External Relations). The country maintains an ambitious goal to close all chapters by 2027 and achieve full EU membership by 2030.
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH):** The Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) entered into force in June 2015. BiH submitted its membership *application in 2016*, was granted *candidate status in December 2022*, and formally opened accession negotiations in March 2024. Progress has been notably slow due to persistent domestic political crises.
- **Kosovo:** Identified as a potential candidate, its SAA came into force in April 2016. As of January 2024, Kosovar citizens benefit from visa-free travel to the Schengen area. The country's future EU integration is intricately linked to the EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia, aiming for a comprehensive agreement on normalization of relations. Kosovo submitted its *application for EU membership in December 2022*.

Public support is a foundational element for the legitimacy and long-term sustainability of the EU accession process, as it provides the necessary domestic political mandate for implementing often difficult and far-reaching reforms. The accession process is not merely



a governmental endeavor but must be a **"state-owned as well as society-owned project"** to succeed. This highlights a crucial dynamic: the EU possesses significant geopolitical and economic leverage to advocate for necessary reforms within the Western Balkan nations. However, if public support for EU integration diminishes, particularly due to perceptions of slow progress or the imposition of external obstacles, this leverage may weaken considerably. A population that is less invested in the EU accession path might be less willing to accept the "painful economic and institutional adaptations" required for membership. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where declining public enthusiasm can directly undermine the EU's ability to drive the very reforms it seeks to achieve.

3. Overall Public Sentiment Towards EU Accession

Public sentiment towards EU accession in the Western Balkan countries, as of May 2025, reveals a complex and varied landscape, with significant differences in trust levels and support for membership across the region. Data from the **Standard Eurobarometer for Spring 2025**, based on surveys conducted in March and April 2025, provides a detailed snapshot of these attitudes.

Table 1: Public Trust in the EU and Support for EU Membership (May 2025, by Country)

Country	% Tend to Trust EU	% Tend Not to Trust EU	% Believe EU Membership is a "Good Thing"	% Believe EU Membership is a "Bad Thing"
Albania	80%	17%	>80%	N/A
Bosnia and Herzegovina	58%	37%	50-60%	N/A
Kosovo	79%	N/A	>80%	N/A
Montenegro	83%	17%	>80%	N/A
North Macedonia	54%	42%	50-60%	N/A
Serbia	37%	57%	34%	32%

*Note: Data primarily derived from **Standard Eurobarometer for Spring 2025** (March-April 2025 surveys). "N/A" indicates data not explicitly provided in the source for that specific category.*

Trust in the EU varies considerably among the Western Balkan nations. **Montenegro and Albania** demonstrate the highest levels of trust, with 83% and 80% of citizens, respectively, indicating a tendency to trust the EU. **Kosovo** also reports a high level of trust at 79%. In **North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)**, trust levels remain above 50%, with 54% and 58% of citizens, respectively, expressing trust in the EU. In contrast, **Serbia** stands out as an outlier, with only 37% of its citizens tending to trust the EU, while a majority of 57% express a tendency not to trust it. This stark difference in trust levels across the region

indicates that a **generalized "Western Balkans" narrative for public opinion may oversimplify the underlying dynamics**. The specific historical ties, geopolitical alignments, and perceptions of the fairness of the accession process likely contribute to these national variations, necessitating **tailored engagement strategies from the EU**.

Support for EU membership as a "good thing" largely mirrors these trust levels. Over 80% of citizens in Montenegro and Albania believe that EU membership would be beneficial for their countries. In North Macedonia and BiH, this sentiment is shared by 50% to 60% of the population. Serbia, however, again shows the lowest support, with only 34% of citizens viewing membership as a good thing, and a significant 32% considering it a bad thing. This reflects a notable and sustained decline in public support for EU membership in Serbia over recent years.

Beyond general support, a more nuanced picture emerges when examining perceptions of economic benefits. **The Balkan Barometer 2024** (surveys conducted March-April 2024) indicates a regional decline in the belief that EU membership would be economically beneficial, dropping from 62% in 2021 to 54% in 2024 across the Western Balkans. This suggests a growing distinction in public perception between the broader, often abstract, aspirational or symbolic value of EU membership (such as peace, stability, and shared values) and the tangible economic advantages it is expected to deliver. If the perceived economic benefits are not materializing as anticipated, it could lead to a less enthusiastic public base for the often-challenging economic reforms required for accession. Despite this decline in perceived economic benefit, overall positive sentiment towards EU membership remains strong, with citizens still viewing it as a pathway to stability, prosperity, and closer integration with Europe. In North Macedonia, specifically, public support for EU integration has stabilized, halting a four-year decline, with 62% of the population supporting membership aspirations in 2024.

4. Youth Perspectives: A Deep Dive into Declining Support

An examination of public opinion data **reveals a distinct trend of declining support for EU accession among the younger generation in the Western Balkans**, a demographic group critical for the region's future stability and development. This **trend is particularly evident in North Macedonia and Serbia**, where youth engagement with the EU project appears to be waning.

In **North Macedonia**, the youngest segments of the population demonstrate less enthusiasm for EU membership compared to older age cohorts. While approximately 60% of individuals aged 18-24 express support for EU membership, this figure is notably lower than the roughly 70% support found among the 25-54 age group. **A particularly concerning finding is that a significant one-third of young people (aged 18-24) in North Macedonia would choose not to vote in a hypothetical referendum on EU membership**. This indicates a **growing apathy or disillusionment**, suggesting that the abstract promise of EU integration may not resonate as strongly with this demographic as it does with older generations.

Similarly, in **Serbia**, young people (under 24 years) are the most undecided regarding continued EU integration, with **35.4% expressing uncertainty**. This age group also shows

the lowest overall interest in EU membership when compared to youth from other parts of the country. Despite some regional support for EU integration in Serbia, **nearly one-fifth of young people oppose it**, and over a third remain undecided. Further underscoring this trend, a concerning 32% of Serbian youth under 24 expressed no desire to travel to the EU, which is particularly striking given the historical appeal of freedom of movement associated with EU integration.

The aspirations and concerns of young people in the Western Balkans are heavily influenced by economic prospects and quality of life. For 38% of youth respondents in the region, EU membership is primarily associated with economic prosperity. **Economic expectations remain a primary driver for supporting EU membership in North Macedonia**, with a majority of pro-membership respondents anticipating future material gains from the integration process. Freedom to study and/or work in the EU is another key expectation, cited by 29% of youth respondents.

However, these aspirations are juxtaposed with the stark reality of **brain drain and emigration**, which represent a significant challenge for the Western Balkans. **The region is estimated to lose between a quarter and half of its skilled and educated young citizens in the coming decades**, a trend that casts serious doubt on its democratic and economic progress and its prospective EU membership. **Over the last three decades, countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina (24%), Albania (37%), North Macedonia (10%), and Serbia (9%) have experienced substantial population losses due to emigration.** A striking **71% of youth aged 18-24 in the Western Balkans are considering leaving the region, a 10% increase in just two years.** The primary factor driving this emigration is the allure of liberal EU migration policies, positioning the EU as the most desirable destination for Western Balkan citizens. This creates a "mobility paradox": while the prospect of EU membership and associated benefits like visa liberalization are pull factors for youth, they simultaneously facilitate the very emigration that depletes the human capital essential for implementing complex EU *acquis* and driving economic growth. **This demographic outflow could ultimately undermine the long-term viability of the region and its capacity for successful integration.**

The disillusionment among youth also stems from a perceived disconnect between the promise of EU integration and the lived reality of slow progress and persistent domestic challenges. For instance, **a majority (60%) of the population in North Macedonia does not believe that the benefits from EU accession will be sufficient to prevent youth brain drain.** This suggests that while EU membership offers opportunities, it is not perceived as a panacea for deep-seated issues like corruption, low wages, and limited domestic opportunities. Young respondents in **Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia also report worryingly low levels of mental well-being and a greater sense of social exclusion compared to their EU counterparts.** This indicates that the gap between the aspirational benefits of EU integration and the day-to-day realities of life in the Western Balkans may be widening for the younger generation, contributing to their apathy or skepticism. Furthermore, **a notable finding in Serbia is that 66% of young respondents preferred an authoritarian leadership model over democratic processes, despite overall support for EU integration in some regions.** This preference for a different governance model could reflect a deeper dissatisfaction with the perceived effectiveness of democratic institutions and the slow pace of reform, potentially impacting their commitment to the EU's value-based integration process.



Table 2: EU Membership Support by Age Cohort (May 2025, Selected Countries)

Country	Age Cohort	Support	Oppose	Undecided	Would Not Vote in Referendum
North Macedonia	18-24	~60%	N/A	N/A	33%
North Macedonia	25-54	~70%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Serbia	Under 24	N/A	~20%	35.4%	N/A
Serbia	46-60	62.8%	N/A	N/A	N/A

Note: Data primarily derived from "Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2014-2024)" and "What do young people in Serbia think about the EU?". "N/A" indicates data not explicitly provided in the source for that specific category.

5. Key Drivers of Shifting Attitudes

The observed shifts in public and youth attitudes towards EU accession in the Western Balkans are driven by a complex interplay of economic, political, and geopolitical factors, compounded by persistent bilateral disputes.

5.1. Economic Factors

Economic considerations remain a primary determinant of public support for EU membership, particularly among the younger generation. The overall belief that EU membership would be economically beneficial for the Western Balkan countries has declined, from 62% in 2021 to 54% in 2024. This erosion of confidence suggests that the abstract ideals of EU integration are less compelling than tangible improvements in daily life. A majority of pro-membership respondents continue to base their preference on the anticipation of future material gains, highlighting a "show me the money" factor in public support.

In response to this economic disillusionment, the EU has introduced significant financial instruments. **The EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans**, adopted in November 2023, aims to double the region's economies within a decade. This plan allocates €6 billion between 2024 and 2027, comprising €2 billion in grants and €4 billion in concessional loans, with disbursements contingent on the implementation of specific socio-economic and fundamental reforms. The plan seeks to integrate the region into the EU single market in key areas, including the free movement of goods, services, and workers, access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), and integration of energy and digital markets. Similarly, **Moldova's Growth Plan**, signed in May 2025, provides €1.9 billion for reforms and single market integration. The effectiveness of these plans in delivering visible economic improvements, such as job creation, increased wages, and better public services, will be crucial in reversing the trend of declining support, particularly among youth who are highly

motivated by economic prospects and quality of life. If these benefits are not tangibly felt, the economic rationale for accession in public perception will weaken.

Concerns over **living standards, unemployment, and emigration** further exacerbate economic disillusionment. **High costs of living and inflation** (affecting 77% of respondents) and low wages (55%) are identified as top economic concerns across the region. **Youth unemployment** remains a pressing issue, with rates two to three times higher than those of older peers. **Emigration**, particularly brain drain, is a major concern, with **significant population losses from BiH (24%), Albania (37%), North Macedonia (10%), and Serbia (9%) over the last three decades**. The prospect of EU membership and visa liberalization, while offering opportunities for mobility, paradoxically acts as a "pull factor" for youth emigration, exacerbating brain drain. This outflow of skilled labor then hinders the very economic development and institutional capacity building necessary for EU accession. The EU faces a dilemma: promoting mobility is a core EU value, but it can inadvertently weaken the human capital base of candidate countries, making their reform efforts more challenging and potentially perpetuating the cycle of slow progress and disillusionment.

5.2. Political and Governance Factors

Perceptions of national political systems and governance significantly influence public support for the EU. Research indicates that more positive (or negative) perceptions of national circumstances generally translate into higher (or lower) support for the EU, with **political satisfaction having a greater impact than economic satisfaction**. This suggests that citizens often project their attitudes towards their national context onto the EU accession process.

Rule of law and corruption remain pervasive issues that undermine public trust. The 2023 European Commission Progress Report on **BiH** highlighted limited progress and even regression in areas such as rule of law and the fight against corruption. **Corruption is a top concern in Serbia and Albania. Moldova** is actively engaged in justice reform and de-oligarchisation efforts. The perceived ineffectiveness or corruption of national governments can be projected onto the EU accession process, leading to a "credibility gap." This gap widens when the EU continues to engage with, and even advance, countries that demonstrate limited internal reform progress, such as BiH being granted candidate status despite unmet benchmarks. Such actions can foster public skepticism that membership is driven by geopolitical considerations rather than genuine reform, potentially disincentivizing difficult domestic changes.

The pace and credibility of the accession process itself are also critical. Dissatisfaction with the slow pace is a frequently cited reason for declining support, particularly in front-runner countries like **Montenegro and Serbia**. Concerns that **"the EU does not want us"** and the increasing number of EU demands contribute to public frustration. While the **"enhanced methodology"** for accession negotiations, adopted in 2020, aimed to make the process more credible, predictable, dynamic, and politically steered, its impact on public perception regarding the process's fairness and efficiency remains mixed.

5.3. Geopolitical and External Influences

]The geopolitical landscape, particularly Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, has significantly re-energized the EU's enlargement agenda, framing it as a **crucial "geo-strategic investment"**. This has led to the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, with accession negotiations formally opening in June 2024. Moldova, in particular, faces substantial challenges from Russia's aggression and hybrid actions, including continuous interference in its internal affairs. A referendum in October 2024 showed 50.38% support for enshrining EU accession in the Moldovan constitution, though domestic turnout was narrow.

The influence of non-EU actors, notably **Russia and China**, also plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and national policy alignment. Some EU Member States express concern that **delays in integrating Western Balkan countries risk reinforcing the influence of these geopolitical competitors**. In **Montenegro**, malign foreign interference, disinformation campaigns, and attempts by third-country actors to influence political processes and public opinion are a noted concern. **Serbia's** non-alignment with EU sanctions against Russia has demonstrably hindered its accession process. Furthermore, **Serbian public opinion shows strong support for cooperation with Russia (64%) and China (67%), contrasting with lower support for the EU (60%) and the US (42%)**. This highlights a **geopolitical "race" for influence**: the EU's strategic imperative to integrate the Western Balkans is directly challenged by the growing presence and alternative narratives offered by non-EU actors. If the EU accession process is perceived as slow or inconsistent, it creates a vacuum that these external actors can exploit, potentially further eroding public support for the EU by offering models that do not demand rigorous reforms. This transforms enlargement into a geopolitical competition for the region's future orientation.

5.4. Bilateral Disputes and Accession Delays

Unresolved bilateral disputes continue to be a significant impediment to the EU accession process, fostering reform fatigue and public disillusionment. The case of **North Macedonia** is **illustrative**: its accession negotiations were delayed for years due to a name dispute with **Greece** (resolved in 2019) and subsequently by issues with **Bulgaria** concerning history, language, minorities and culture. While Bulgaria lifted its veto in June 2022, it continues to demand constitutional changes to include the Bulgarian minority and an end to "hate speech". North Macedonia's current government insists on a "two-way street" for constitutional amendments, indicating that it expects reciprocal concessions from Bulgaria. A substantial 43% of the population in North Macedonia attributes the slowdown in EU accession primarily to obstructions from neighboring countries, rather than domestic issues.

Similarly, **Serbia's EU integration is intricately linked to its EU-facilitated dialogue with Kosovo**, with the aim of achieving a legally binding comprehensive agreement on normalization of relations. Normalization of relations with Kosovo is explicitly stated as a "priority and a requirement" for Serbia's EU accession. However, the vast majority of the Serbian public views Kosovo as an integral part of Serbia, and the EU's stance is often perceived as pressuring Serbia to relinquish its sovereignty, which significantly contributes to waning public support for EU membership in Serbia.

These bilateral disputes highlight a critical challenge: internal EU friction can become an external obstacle to enlargement. The unanimity requirement within the Council means that a single EU Member State can effectively halt the accession process of a candidate country due to bilateral issues. **This undermines the EU's credibility as a consistent and predictable partner, as the process is not solely "merit-based" but also subject to the political leverage of individual Member States.** This dynamic can lead to profound reform fatigue and public disillusionment within candidate countries, as progress becomes contingent on external political dynamics rather than solely on their own reform efforts.

6. Implications for EU Enlargement Policy

The observed trends in public and youth support in the Western Balkans carry significant implications for the EU's enlargement policy, particularly concerning the **integrity of its "merit-based" principle and the effectiveness of its "reversibility" mechanism.** The EU accession process is formally rooted in the **Copenhagen criteria**, which mandate stable democratic institutions, adherence to the rule of law and human rights, a functioning market economy, and the capacity to adopt the entire *acquis*. The **"fundamentals first"** approach, adopted in 2020, further emphasizes a strong focus on the rule of law, fundamental rights, democratic institutions, and public administration reform, with progress in this cluster determining the overall pace of negotiations. The **"reversibility"** mechanism is designed to allow for negotiations to fall back if countries fail to deliver tangible reform results or seriously violate fundamental EU values.

However, recent developments suggest a **potential "geopolitical bypass" of this merit-based approach.** The EU's decision to accelerate Bosnia's candidacy despite unmet benchmarks and the fast-tracking of Ukraine's screening process indicate that geopolitical considerations sometimes take precedence over strict adherence to the established criteria. While strategically understandable in the context of broader European security, this approach risks undermining the credibility of the accession process. If candidate countries perceive that geopolitical urgency can circumvent rigorous reform requirements, it may disincentivize genuine, difficult reforms at home, potentially leading to "unearned rewards" that do not drive sustainable change. Such a perception could also foster resentment among countries that have diligently pursued reforms without similar geopolitical tailwinds.

To counter declining support and re-energize the accession process, the EU has demonstrated a renewed commitment through significant financial instruments. The EU Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, with its €6 billion allocation, and the Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova, providing €1.9 billion, are designed to offer tangible benefits and accelerate socio-economic convergence *before* full accession. These plans aim to integrate the Western Balkans into the EU single market in specific areas, such as the free movement of goods, services, and workers, and integration of energy and digital markets. This represents a strategic attempt to address economic disillusionment and reform fatigue by providing concrete advantages.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these financial incentives in driving deep structural reforms remains a key concern. **While disbursements are rigorously conditioned on reforms, questions persist regarding the "enforceability" of conditionality and whether**

the "quantity" of funds is sufficient compared to what full members receive. The challenge lies in ensuring that financial support translates into genuine and irreversible institutional change, rather than merely short-term compliance. If these funds are not rigorously tied to fundamental reforms, particularly in areas like rule of law and governance, and if the financial support is perceived as insufficient to bridge the existing economic gap, it may not foster the desired long-term societal transformation or sustained public support. The EU must ensure that its financial engagement leads to a profound and lasting alignment with its values and standards, rather than simply a temporary alleviation of economic pressures.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

The sociological data as of May 2025 reveals a concerning trend of declining public support for the EU accession process in the Western Balkans, with intensity among the younger generation. While a foundational level of trust in the EU persists in most countries (excluding Serbia), the perception of tangible economic benefits from membership has notably diminished across the region. This indicates a growing disconnect between the aspirational promise of EU integration and the lived realities of citizens, who are increasingly motivated by concrete improvements in their daily lives.

The disillusionment among youth is especially critical. Their lower enthusiasm for EU membership, coupled with a significant propensity to consider emigration, highlights a profound challenge. **The prospect of EU membership, while offering opportunities for mobility, inadvertently exacerbates brain drain by facilitating the departure of educated and skilled young people.** This creates a "demographic time bomb" for the Western Balkans, as the very **human capital necessary for implementing complex EU *acquis* and driving economic growth is depleted.** The long-term viability of the region and its eventual integration into the EU are jeopardized if the root causes of youth emigration, such as **corruption, low wages, and limited domestic opportunities**, are not urgently addressed by both national governments and the EU.

The shifting attitudes are further compounded by **persistent internal governance issues, including corruption and a perceived lack of progress in rule of law**, which erode the credibility of the accession process. **Bilateral disputes, particularly those involving North Macedonia and Serbia**, demonstrate how internal EU dynamics (such as the unanimity rule) can become external obstacles, leading to reform fatigue and undermining the EU's consistent application of its merit-based principle.

The EU finds itself at a critical juncture, balancing its geopolitical imperative to integrate the Western Balkans for strategic stability with the integrity of its merit-based accession process. While the renewed impetus and financial instruments, such as the Growth Plan, are designed to offer tangible benefits and re-engage populations, their success hinges on rigorous conditionality and a clear demonstration that financial incentives lead to genuine and irreversible structural reforms.

For the future of EU accession in the Western Balkans, a multi-faceted approach is essential. The EU must enhance the predictability and credibility of the accession path, ensuring that progress is consistently recognized and rewarded, and that bilateral



issues do not disproportionately impede the overall process. Simultaneously, **Western Balkan governments must** demonstrate **unwavering political will** to implement deep, fundamental reforms in governance, rule of law, and economic development. The long-term success of EU integration will ultimately depend on the ability of **both the EU and the candidate countries** to deliver visible **improvements in quality of life and economic opportunities** that resonate with the aspirations of their citizens, **particularly the younger generation**, thereby stemming the tide of disillusionment and fostering a renewed commitment to the European project.



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