

## **Geopolitical Aspects of the EU Enlargement Process: Macedonian and Ukrainian Case**

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### **Abstract**

This paper compares the integration processes of North Macedonia and Ukraine, which have recently opened EU accession negotiations. The significant disparity in the pace of their integration processes - remarkably slow in the case of North Macedonia and exceptionally fast in the case of Ukraine - serves to examine whether EU enlargement decisions are shaped more by the institutional criteria or by geopolitical interests of member states. Using a comparative approach, the study analyzes the European policies and relations with both countries and the EU role in addressing their internal and external disputes. The study aims to demonstrate how EU enlargement is shaped by EU standards and geopolitical interests, interpreting the findings through intergovernmental and realist perspectives that emphasize state-driven decision-making and security imperatives. The results reveal that North Macedonia's accession was delayed due to non-criteria political disputes, while Ukraine's accession process was accelerated for security reasons, demonstrating how geopolitical considerations can outweigh normative standards in EU enlargement.

**Keywords:** European enlargement, N. Macedonia, Ukraine, geopolitics, intergovernmentalism, realism

## Introduction

The enlargement of the European Union has long been one of the most important and transformative processes on the continent, reshaping political, economic and security landscapes across Europe. Traditionally the EU has presented enlargement as a rules-based process guided by clearly defined criteria, such as democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. However, recent developments suggest that geopolitical considerations are increasingly influential in determining the pace and direction of enlargement. Although European accession policies have been widely studied, much of the literature treats the enlargement process in general terms, while candidate countries are most often analyzed separately rather than in a comparative framework. Numerous works examine the Eastern enlargement, the accession process of Western Balkan countries, and, more recently, the Ukrainian case, but there is still a lack of comparative analyses that explore the geopolitical dimension of EU enlargement across different enlargement packages. By examining the interplay between formal accession criteria and geopolitical aspects of national interests, this study aims to deepen the understanding of how the EU balances normative principles with strategic calculations in its enlargement policy, and to fill the above-mentioned gap by conducting a comparative analysis that contributes to the theoretical debates between intergovernmentalism and realism.

The study is structured around two central research questions. The first is *whether the individual EU members' interests exert greater influence on the accession process than the Union's common policies*; the second is *which geopolitical factor has the greatest impact on the European integration process?* To address these questions, the study provides a comparative analysis of enlargement policies concerning two candidate countries: North Macedonia (hereafter Macedonia)<sup>1</sup> and Ukraine.

While both countries share the status of EU candidates, they differ significantly in their geopolitical context, the enlargement package they belong to and the duration of their accession process. This divergence is pivotal to the analysis, as Macedonia has been involved in the process for two decades, while Ukraine progressed from candidate status to accession negotiations in less than two years. This contrast illustrates how, alongside compliance with EU standards and conditions, the geopolitical context plays a crucial role in determining progress.

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<sup>1</sup> In the analysis which covers the period from 1991 to 2025, the author uses the name "Macedonia" corresponding the country's official name from 1991 to 2019. The same term is maintained for references to the period after February 2019, when Constitutional Amendment 33 to the Preamble, introduced the term "North" to officially rename the country.

By comparing Macedonia (a case defined by prolonged conditionality and intergovernmental blockades) with Ukraine (a case of accelerated accession under geopolitical urgency), this study addresses a critical gap in the literature. The comparative approach also provides valuable insights into the factors shaping the EU's approach to accession negotiations. It contributes to ongoing debates on intergovernmentalism in EU processes, as well as the realist school of thought in international relations. More broadly, the analysis seeks to answer when and why the EU acts as a normative, rules-based actor, and when it behaves as a geopolitical, interest-driven actor. In doing so, the study not only enriches theoretical debates but also offers relevant policy implications for the credibility and future direction of EU enlargement.

## Methods

The research applies a comparative case study approach, focusing on the EU accession process of Macedonia and Ukraine. The selection of these cases reflects their shared status as candidate countries, while their contrasting accession trajectories allow for a deeper analysis of the role of geopolitical factors in enlargement policy. The analysis covers the period from the early 1990s, when both countries gained independence, to 2025, by which time Ukraine and Macedonia are both engaged in active accession process. The sources were selected to ensure comprehensive coverage of both legal and political dimensions.

The first part, entitled *Macedonian and Ukrainian relations with EU* provides a detailed chronological overview of each country's relations with the Union, with the aim of comparing the dynamics of their progress, from signing of the first agreements to the present day. This section draws primarily on legal agreements, such as Stabilization and Accession Agreements, Association Agreements, and Accession Partnership documents.

The second part, *Geopolitical aspects of EU enlargements*, analyzes the geopolitical dimensions of the EU accession process in the cases of Ukraine and Macedonia. This section relies on secondary sources, including academic books, peer – reviewed journal articles and policy analyses addressing EU enlargement, intergovernmental decision-making and geopolitics.

The third part, *Comparative analysis of the Macedonian and Ukrainian case*, employs a wide range of sources, including primary documents such as European Commission reports, Council conclusions, and enlargement strategy papers, as well as international bilateral agreement, national policy documents from both countries, and secondary academic analysis. This comparative analysis provides a comprehensive picture of the difficulties and advantages faced by both countries, situating them within the

framework of intergovernmental and realist perspectives on EU enlargement, its standards and its geopolitical interests.

The findings are interpreted through the lens of theory of intergovernmentalism within EU integration studies (which follows classical approach that states are the main actors in decision-making process), as well as through realist perspectives in international relations (which assert that state insecurity is the central problem in international relations and that states must ensure their own security, as no other actor can be reliably depended upon). This dual-theoretical framework helps to uncover whether the EU's enlargement policy is primarily driven by strategic interests of individual member states or by EU's normative commitments to democratic governance and rule of law.

### **Macedonian and Ukrainian relations with the EU**

To address the first study question: *whether the individual EU members' interests exert greater influence on the accession process than the Union's common policies*, this section analyses the European policies and agreements signed with both states, emphasizing the EU's role and interest in resolving the internal and external disputes that Macedonia and Ukraine have encountered and continue to face.

Both Macedonia and Ukraine declared independence and became sovereign states in the early 1990s. Unlike some federal republics of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav Federation, they went through this process without armed conflict, but they faced certain subsequent challenges.

Macedonia was the only one of the six Yugoslav republics not involved in the armed conflict with the Yugoslav army. Nevertheless, less than a year after declaring independence, the country encountered its first major international obstacles, primarily related to its recognition and the dispute over its constitutional name. In the European Council Lisbon Declaration of June 27, 1992 and its annex related to declaration on former Yugoslavia, the European Council (reiterated the position taken by the Community and its Member States in Guimaraes on the request of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to be recognized as an independent State), expressed its readiness to recognize that republic within its existing borders according to their Declaration on December 16, 1991, but only under a name that did not include the term "Macedonia" (The European Council, 1992). Furthermore, the Council considered the borders of this republic as inviolable and guaranteed in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter and the Charter of Paris. This declaration, along with the two constitutional amendments on Articles 3 and 49 (1992), the change of the national flag (1995) and the use of the abbreviation FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic

of Macedonia) in international organizations, were all made under Greek pressure and with European support.

On April 8, 1993, the Republic of Macedonia became a full-fledged member of the United Nations and on November 9, 1995, it joined the Council of Europe. Two years later, in April 1997, the Cooperation and Transport Agreement (CTA) was signed in Luxembourg, officially establishing political and economic ties between the Republic of Macedonia and the European Union (EU). Following the CTA's entry into force in January 1998, the Macedonian Parliament declared EU membership as the country's strategic goal. In the following year, 1999, the EU launched the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP)<sup>2</sup>, and Macedonia was the first country in the region to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), in April 2001. In August, the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) was also signed, effectively ending the armed conflict that had begun in February. Although OFA has a national character, it was signed with international participation and assistance. The representatives from the USA (James Pardew) and the representative from the EU (Francois Leotard) signed the agreement alongside the leaders of the two largest Macedonian and the two largest Albanian parties in Macedonia. The EU was also tasked with coordinating and implementing the agreement, in collaboration with the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the OSCE and the UNHCR. The points of the agreement comprise an agreed framework for securing the future of Macedonia's democracy and for fostering closer integration with the Euro-Atlantic community (OSCE, 2001). In fact, the implementation of OFA became crucial criterion in evaluating Macedonia's progress under the SAA, which aims to support the country in strengthening democracy, ensuring economic stability (through legal alignment with EU standards and transition to market economy), and promoting the rule of law and protection of fundamental rights (Eur-Lex, 2001).

Recognizing Macedonia's progress in legislative alignment and fulfillment of OFA and SAA obligations, the European Council granted the country's candidate status on November 9, 2005, one year after its application for EU membership. Four years later, in October 2009, the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations, marking the transition to the second phase of the SAA. On February 10, 2010, the European Parliament adopted a resolution urging the Council to support the Commission's recommendation at its March 2010 Summit. However, the decision to initiate negotiations was delayed for a decade, primarily due to the unresolved name dispute with Greece.

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<sup>2</sup> SAP was designed to foster regional cooperation and provide financial assistance through the CARDS program (2000-2006), later replaced by Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA I: 2007-2013); IPA II: 2014-2020).

The Greek veto became a significant roadblock in multiple EU Council Summits (between 2009 and 2018), preventing Macedonia from moving forward in its EU accession talks. The dispute was ultimately resolved with the Prespa Agreement, signed in 2018 (between Greece and Macedonia, under the auspices of the United Nations)<sup>3</sup>. It is illogical that the Prespa Agreement on the name change was signed in June, while the referendum on the agreement, organized by the Macedonian government, was held on September 30. Just before the referendum, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs (Federica Mogherini) and EU Commissioner for Enlargement (Johannes Hahn) actively participated in the negotiations, providing support and encouraging the public to vote in the referendum. Despite a voter turnout of 37%, below the required 50% threshold, the results of the referendum were validated. The agreement officially resolved the name dispute, led to a constitutional amendment changing the country's name to North Macedonia, but new challenges emerged. In October 2019, France and the Netherlands blocked the opening of EU accession negotiations with Macedonia and Albania, despite the positive recommendations of the European Commission. The European Parliament considered this delay a strategic mistake that harmed the EU's credibility and risked pushing the two countries towards foreign actors with differing values (Parliament, 2019). It called for stronger democracy support in the Western Balkans and urged EU leaders to act responsibly and approve negotiations, stressing that decisions should be based on merit rather than political agendas (not judged by domestic political agendas in other countries). In 2020, the EU finally agreed to open negotiations. But this time, Bulgaria blocked the Macedonian accession process in November 2020, justifying its decision by stating that there had been no significant progress in fulfilling the Treaty of friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation between Bulgaria and Macedonia signed in 2017. The conditions set by Bulgaria included adherence to the language formula established in 1999 and reaffirmed in 2017, a timeline for implementing the agreement and an explicit text in the roadmap of implementation saying that any claims for a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria will not be supported in any form. Citing disputes over historical and linguistic issues, Bulgaria maintained its veto in May and October 2021. As a response, the message from the Council's presidency was that enlargement should not be held hostage by bilateral issues. Finally on 22 June 2022, Bulgaria approved the French proposal regarding the Macedonian issue, which imposed four conditions for Macedonia's future EU accession: effective implementation of

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<sup>3</sup> Amendment XXXIII stipulates that the words "Republic of Macedonia" are replaced with "Republic of North Macedonia", and the word "Macedonia" is replaced with "North Macedonia", except in Article 36 of the Constitution.

the Treaty of friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation; guarantees for the rights of Bulgarians in Macedonia through their inclusion in the Constitution as a constitutive people; assurance that nothing in Macedonia's accession process would be interpreted as Bulgaria's recognition of the Macedonian language; and European guarantees that Bulgaria's conditions would be fulfilled.

Unlike Macedonia, Ukraine has followed a different path in establishing its relationship with the European Union. Based on Article 72 of the Soviet Union Constitution (Supreme Soviet of the USSR, 1982) it was stipulated that each federal state reserved the right to secede from the USSR. Exercising this right, Ukraine declared its independence on August 24, 1991. A few months later with the signing of Alma-Ata Protocol on December 21, 1991, nearly all ex-Soviet republics became members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (regional intergovernmental organization in Eurasia) and six months later, on May 15, 1992, almost all CIS members signed the Collective Security Treaty, a defensive military alliance (Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2014). Two years later, Ukraine signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU, which entered into force in 1998. This agreement laid the foundation for bilateral relations and expanded the existing TACIS program (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States). The program objectives included establishing a framework for political, economic, and trade relations, focusing on democratic and economic reforms and providing a basis for technical assistance. A few years later, in 1997, Ukraine, together with Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova established the Consultative Group, which later led to the formation of Organization for Democracy and Economic Development-GUAM in 2006. This initiative was based on the idea of a common path towards the structures of Euro-Atlantic cooperation. In 2003, the EU launched the *European Neighbourhood Policy* (ENP) to foster stability, security and prosperity, and it aimed to strengthen relations with neighbouring countries. Ukraine joined the ENP in 2004. The same year the *Orange Revolution*<sup>4</sup> occurred reflecting a social struggle between aligning with European democratic norms and remaining within the post-Soviet political sphere dominated by Russian influence. The involvement of EU High Representative Javier Solana, along with other international representatives, helped find a political resolution and avoid violence (Pifer, 2007). With the aim to help Ukraine and bring it closer to the EU standards, EU in 2007 set out political and economic reforms in the framework of the Council of Europe's Action Plans. MEDA, TACIS and other

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<sup>4</sup> The cause of the *Orange Revolution* was the contested 2004 presidential election between pro-Russian candidate Yanukovich and pro-western reformist Yushchenko. The protest adopted the color orange as a symbol of the movement representing Yushchenko's campaign and led to a landmark decision for a re-run election, resulting in Yushchenko victory in 2005.

programmes were consolidated into the *European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument* (ENPI), which prioritized sustainable development and the approximation of EU policies and standards in neighbouring countries. In 2009, the EU introduced the *Eastern Partnership Initiative*, facilitating accelerated political association and deeper economic integration with its Eastern neighbours. The Association agreement was initiated in 2012 and was planned to be signed during the EU Eastern Partnership Summit held in Vilnius the following November. On this occasion, Association Agreements were signed with Georgia and Moldova, but were canceled with Ukraine. In fact, the proposal for Ukraine's accession to the EU was made by Romano Prodi in 2013, a year before the Russian annexation of Crimea and previously in 2004, when he was acting as President of the European Commission and engineered the "big bang", but unfortunately, at that time, the EU's agenda was absorbed by internal problems caused by the euro crisis (Romano Prodi, 2013)<sup>5</sup>. The signing of the Agreement with Ukraine took place in 2014, after the outbreak of the protests known as *Euromaidan*<sup>6</sup> and the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich. This act was considered by Russia as an act of sabotage against Moscow's interests and influence (Kuchins, 2022), and prompted Russia to organize a referendum in Crimea just a few days before the agreement was signed on March 16, 2014. Two days later, Russian President Putin requested the Federal Assembly to review the constitutional law for the inclusion of two new subjects in the federation - Crimea and Sevastopol - and to prepare an agreement for their entry into the Russian Federation. On March 27, the United Nations General Assembly adopted measures underscoring that the referendum had no validity and called for the non-recognition of any alteration of the status of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. That same year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution confirming that Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and any other European country with European aspirations could submit their application for joining the EU. The new Ukrainian government signed the Political EU Accession Agreement on March 21, 2014, followed by the Association Agreement signed by President Poroshenko on June 27. Since July 2014, trilateral consultations

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<sup>5</sup> "It is of economic, political, and geostrategic importance to Europe and the U.S. that Ukraine comes under the European umbrella of shared values and free trade. Engaging Ukraine, a reliable NATO partner, would also be beneficial for the West in terms of security interests. This is a serious geopolitical opportunity for Europe and the US. We should make the most of it. Ukraine is important to Europe as a source of economic growth and energy security, as well as a bridge to Russia", resumes Romano Prodi

<sup>6</sup> The Euromaidan crisis began with thousands of people gathered in independence Square Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kiev to protest the Ukrainian government's decision under Prime Minister, Mykola Azarov to suspend the Association Agreement with the European Union and the President Viktor Yanukovich's refusal to sign the agreement at Vilnius Summit.

between the EU, Ukraine, and Russia have addressed the implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. This agreement promotes deeper political ties (gradual approximation of Ukrainian legislation, rules and procedures, including EU standards), stronger economic links (it reduces export tariffs for European firms and makes customs procedures more efficient) and respect for common values. The EU declared that it remains committed and open to achieving practical solutions to Russia's concerns regarding the implementation of the EU-Ukraine DCFTA<sup>7</sup>, while all parties agreed on the importance of trade liberalisation and WTO commitments.

Following the *Euromaidan* protest, pro-Russian protests began in Ukraine's region of Donbas, where the separatist groups declared Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts as independent People's Republics. Two protocols known as Minsk I and Minsk II were signed, with the aim of finding a permanent solution. The first protocol was signed in September 2014, under the mediation of the OSCE and supported by the EU. The second protocol was signed in February 2015, with the participation of France and Germany, but not as formal representatives of the EU<sup>8</sup>. Despite these efforts, both agreements ultimately failed to end the conflict, which continued to escalate. After the *Euromaidan* protest and the signing of the Association Agreement, EU assistance through the ENI rose to more than €200 million annually<sup>9</sup>. In fact, the EU has provided exceptional support to Ukraine, at a level second to that for pre-accession countries (Wolczuk, 2023).

After Ukraine withdrew from the Commonwealth of Independent States in July 2018 the NATO-Ukraine Commission Summit in Brussels reaffirmed NATO's commitment to a stable and secure Ukraine, as well as Ukraine's commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration. With the duty to ensure the implementation of the strategic path for Ukraine's full membership in the European Union and the Atlantic Treaty in 2019, articles 85, 102, and 116 of the Ukrainian Constitution were supplemented with the duty to implement the strategic course of the state for gaining full-fledged membership of Ukraine in the European Union and the Atlantic Treaty Organization (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1996). A few years later, Russia signed a decree recognizing the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, based on a resolution adopted by the Duma on February 15, 2022. Shortly after, Russia announced its intention

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<sup>7</sup>As part of broader peace efforts respecting Ukraine's sovereignty, the DCFTA's provisional application was postponed until January 1, 2016

<sup>8</sup> "Most EU member states turned a blind eye to the issue of Crimea and hid behind Germany and France and agreed to let the Germans and the French decide about Donbas first, then we will think about what to do with Crimea, and in the meantime, we will keep trading with Russia". Cit in (Raik, 2024)

<sup>9</sup> Between 1991 and 2015, the EU offered Ukraine assistance worth €12.1 billion

to send troops to the region, citing Article 51 (Chapter VII: Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression) of the UN Charter (United Nations, 1945) and the treaties of friendship and mutual assistance with the two republics (ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 22). Russia subsequently launched a “special military operation” in Ukraine. A few days later, on February 28, Ukraine submitted its application for EU membership. Although the French President had said it could be decades before Ukraine joins, on June 17, the Commission delivered its Opinion and few days later, on June 23, the European Council endorsed the European Commission Opinion and granted the candidate status to Ukraine. In December 2023 the European Council decided to open accession negotiations.

Since the Russian invasion, the EU has supported Ukraine from the outset and has adopted 15 sanctions packages against Russia (government and financial, business, defense, technology and media sectors) to weaken its war capabilities. These include bans on seaborne crude oil and petroleum products (covering 90% of EU oil imports from Russia), restrictions on liquefied natural gas (LNG) transshipment, coal imports and exports of oil-refining technologies. While gas imports were not banned, the EU imposed strict limits on oil transport services and cracked down on sanction evasion. By early 2025, the EU and its members had provided nearly €134 billion in support to Ukraine, including €67.3 billion in financial, humanitarian, and emergency aid, €48.3 billion in military support and €17 billion for Ukrainian refugees in the EU (Archick, 2025). However, this robust support has not been unanimous, as some member states have resisted certain measures. From the very beginning Hungary has been the strongest opponent of the EU’s financial support for Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, and even Ukraine’s integration into the European Union. In fact, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, no EU geopolitical decision related to the war in Ukraine’s defense against Russia has escaped Hungary’s obstruction or attempts at political leverage (Landsbergis, 2025). In December 2023 the Hungarian prime minister suggested that the EU should sign a “strategic partnership” with Ukraine for 5-10 years, and only then resume the discussion on its accession to the EU. As a condition, he requested that the language rights of ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine be restored; otherwise, Hungary would not support Ukraine on any international relations issue. In his statement from March 2025, he declared that Ukraine’s membership in the EU will have negative consequences for Hungarian interests.

### **Geopolitical aspects of EU enlargements**

To address the second study question: *which specific geopolitical motives are most influential in a decision-making process*, this section

analyzes the geopolitical dimensions of the EU accession process in the cases of Macedonia and Ukraine.

Following Croatia's accession, the election of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission in 2014, marked a significant shift in EU enlargement policy. In his *Political Guidelines for the next European Commission* the enlargement process was notably absent, signalling a period of reduced institutional focus on EU expansion. It was only in 2017 that the Commission adopted a strategy *A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with Western Balkans*, reaffirming the region's European future as a strategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe founded on common values (European Commission, 2018). In March 2020, after Juncker's presidency, the Commission adopted a revised accession methodology, aimed at increasing credibility, predictability, dynamism and stronger political steer. Prior to the official start (in December 2019) of the new European Commission led by President Ursula von der Leyen, the Council meeting on October 15, revealed continued divisions among the member states. France, the Netherlands, Denmark and Spain voted against opening negotiations with Albania, which also affected Macedonia. Although the objections targeted Albania, the EU opted to treat Albania and Macedonia together, highlighting the interconnection of bilateral and regional dynamics. Finally, in March 2020, the Council approved *Strengthening the accession process - A credible European perspective for the Western Balkans*, reorganizing the 36 negotiation chapters into six clusters and emphasizing the four principles of credibility, predictability, dynamism and stronger political steer. This approach underscored the EU's attempt to reconcile internal political divergences with the strategic imperative of maintaining enlargement momentum. Nevertheless, the Macedonian accession trajectory faced further delays due to Bulgaria's veto, grounded in historical and linguistic disputes. This delay highlighted the continuing influence of individual member states on enlargement, even mid broader EU reforms. The breakthrough occurred during the French presidency and coincided with the granting of candidate status to Ukraine, which was invaded by Russia in February 2022. The ongoing war further reinforced the geopolitical necessity of curbing Russian influence in the Western Balkans, underscoring the urgency of EU integration of the region (Radic, 2022). Considering the seriousness of the situation, during a visit to Skopje in March 2022, High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell emphasized that the Western Balkans are a strategic priority for the EU and that their alignment with EU positions on Russia demonstrates their commitment to shared European values. He described the current situation as an "awakening moment for Europe, a moment to reinvigorate the enlargement process in order to anchor the Western Balkans firmly to the EU" (Delegation of the European Union to North Macedonia, 2022).

This geopolitical urgency, which accelerated Ukraine's EU accession process and incentivized France to resolve the Macedonian - Bulgarian dispute during its EU presidency, illustrates how external security threats can reshape internal EU decision-making. French President Macron, who had previously blocked the accession talks with Albania and Macedonia in 2019, called for new members to be admitted "as swiftly as possible". Similarly, German Chancellor Scholz framed enlargement as essential for lasting peace in response to Russia's war of aggression (Buras, 2023). That same year, the Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg initiated the informal "Friends of the Western Balkans" group comprising of Greece, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. The group's objective was to provide the Western Balkan states with a realistic and credible accession prospect while advancing concrete progress toward EU membership.

The official return of enlargement to the EU agenda occurred in November 2023, when the European Commission adopted the *Growth Plan for Western Balkans*, signalling its renewed centrality on the EU agenda. The Plan aims to integrate the region into the EU's single market, strengthen regional economic cooperation, deepen EU-related reforms and increase pre-accession funding to accelerate socio-economic convergence. Subsequently, in October 2024, the Commission approved the reform agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Serbia, and ensured support through instruments such as the *Plan for the Western Balkans*, and the *Ukraine Facility* intended for Ukraine. Furthermore, the appointment of a Commissioner for Enlargement and another for the Mediterranean, along with the new Pact for the Mediterranean, signaled a strategic effort to strengthen partnerships, investment and stability across the region (Leyen, 2024). In addition to this, in her *Political guidelines for 2025-2029*, Ursula von der Leyen framed enlargement as a moral, political, and geostrategic imperative, emphasizing its role in enhancing the EU's global influence, resilience and security. This framing underscored the EU leadership's recognition that enlargement is not only a procedural process but also a tool for advancing strategic interest, setting the stage for a differentiated approach in cases of heightened geopolitical urgency, which explains why Ukraine's accelerated accession trajectory reflects a strategic shift in the EU's enlargement approach, driven primarily by security considerations. This "open door" policy prioritized geopolitical containment of Russian influence over the traditional norm-based enlargement frameworks. Nevertheless, while Ukraine remains the EU's strategic priority, resistance from Eurosceptic member states, particularly Hungary and Slovakia, has pressured EU institutions to reinforce reforms in sensitive areas, particularly minority rights. Orban's government, which has avoided providing military aid and has maintained close ties with Russia, delayed EU funding, opposed the EU's seven-year budget proposal (which

diverts funds from vital cohesion and agricultural subsidies to Ukraine) and argued that Ukraine is unprepared for EU membership due to war-related territorial disputes, economic instability and institutional weaknesses. It warned that Ukraine's accession would threaten Hungary's national interests and security and impose burdens on existing member states, emphasizing that accession should follow merit-based criteria rather than political expedience.

### **Comparative analysis of the Macedonian and Ukrainian cases**

Considering all the arguments presented thus far, this section provides a comparative analysis of Macedonia and Ukraine within the framework of intergovernmental and realist perspectives, focusing on the countries' accession trajectories.

The results of the analysis elaborated in the two previous sections demonstrate that Macedonia's progress in the EU accession process depends more on the interests of individual member states than on the general accession criteria. The Macedonian accession process was repeatedly obstructed by vetoes, mainly from two member states, each requiring constitutional changes. Greece blocked progress for decades over the name dispute, while Bulgaria imposed conditions regarding language and historical interpretation. This indicates that the EU deferred to individual member state preferences and delegated dispute resolution to the UN in the first case (the name dispute) and adopted a temporary solution in the second (dispute with Bulgaria), largely prompted by the new geopolitical context created by the war in Ukraine.

In contrast, EU policy toward Ukraine was largely unified throughout, influenced by the ongoing military conflict, except for Hungary, which has made demands not only for Ukraine but also for EU itself. The Hungarian request from March 2025 included 12 demands, among them: "a Union, but without Ukraine", "protecting Christian heritage" and "peace in Europe".

Both examples demonstrate that the veto power allows individual states to assert their preferences and EU enlargement, in practice, reflects intergovernmental dynamics, where states remain the primary actors in decision-making, while supranational institutions (such as the European Commission) exert limited independent influence.

At the same time, the Ukrainian case reveals how an external security threat (the geopolitical urgency created by Russia's invasion) led the EU to prioritize geopolitical considerations in accession decisions. Although neither Russia nor Ukraine was an EU member at the time, Ukraine was swiftly granted candidate status, and within a year and a half began accession negotiations – a process that took Macedonia 17 years. This raises the question: could Ukraine have implemented all the necessary reforms in such a short period? In fact, even though Hungary considered Ukraine's progress insufficient, the European Commission's draft report positively noted

Ukraine's efforts on minority rights. Thus, the Commission positively assessed the changes to minority legislation approved in December 2023, and Brussels even went so far as to reaffirm its support for the Ukrainian law, even without waiting for its analysis by the Venice Commission (Sydorenko, 2024). These actions illustrate how the EU applies double standards toward candidate states, and prompt two questions. First, did the EU respond swiftly to assist Ukraine, or to preserve broader security, including its own national interests? Second, was Ukraine a special case due to its geopolitical significance or because of Europe's dependence on strategic resources? The answer to these questions emerges naturally from the second research question: *which geopolitical motives most strongly influence the EU enlargement process*, and the contrasting experiences of Macedonia and Ukraine provide concrete evidence.

In the case of Macedonia, the Stabilization and Association Process was designed to stabilize the region and facilitate integration into the EU. It provided a framework for political dialogue, encouraged international and economic cooperation, supported legal harmonization with EU standards and aimed to establish a free trade area and improve regional cooperation. Within this framework, the EU emphasized not only institutional and economic reform, but also the consolidation of domestic stability, which made the implementation of the Ohrid Framework agreement (with great attention to minority rights and the principle of multiculturalism) a central benchmark for Macedonia's progress. In Ukraine's case, EU agreements were more focused on trade and economic cooperation, while the Minsk II Protocol never acquired the same centrality in Ukraine's integration process, as the Ohrid Framework Agreement did in the Macedonian case. In fact, for the EU, it was sufficient to prevent ethnic escalation in Macedonia, while in Ukraine, the priority was to guarantee the economic security and prosperity through closer relations. Although the events of 2014 - the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the armed conflicts in the Donbas region - were harbingers to the Russian invasion, the EU responded only after the invasion occurred, not by formulating a specific solution that would become a condition for progress in the accession process, as in the Macedonian case, but rather by granting candidate status to Ukraine and opening accession negotiations within a record timeframe. Considering these developments, Ukraine represents a unique case in which the acceleration of its accession process was driven primarily by security imperatives. By contrast, what makes Macedonia unique is not the EU's preventive role in averting an ethnic conflict, but the fact that its accession progress was obstructed for reasons beyond the formal accession criteria.

In fact, the EU approach toward Macedonia is a historical precedent in which a single state, let alone the international community, insisted on a

country's name change and made it a condition for progress in international relations, allowing the process to be prolonged over decades. Although Macedonia had been recognized by more than half of the United Nations member states, including some EU member states, the establishment of official relations with the EU was conditioned upon meeting the demands of a single country - Greece. The EU's failure to actively address or resolve the dispute effectively delegated its authority to Greece, allowing decades-long obstruction of Macedonia's accession process. By treating Greece's position as a precondition rather than exercising its own leverage, the EU demonstrated a lack of strategic leadership and undermined its credibility as a supranational actor capable of enforcing collective decision-making. Interestingly, despite the EU's insistence on these conditions imposed by its member state, EU did not participate in the mediation or facilitation of the process, instead leaving the role of mediator to the UN, further highlighting the asymmetry between formal authority and practical influence in EU enlargement policy.

Regarding the second blockade of Macedonia's accession process, imposed by Bulgaria, it is noteworthy that no previous EU enlargement required a candidate country to deny the existence of its own language, rename it or reinterpret its national history. Indeed, following Bulgaria's veto of Macedonia's accession, only two EU member states, Czechia and Slovakia, vetoed the European Council's enlargement conclusions. These countries objected to the content, asserting that it contained elements of historical falsification (related to Bulgaria), which they argued could be highly detrimental to the enlargement process and might introduce further complications (EWB, 2020). They stated that they would not allow the Union to serve as an arbiter of their shared histories, nor dictate how national identities or language should be defined and used. Unfortunately, the dispute is still unresolved, although concerns about prioritization of bilateral agreements and the pursuit of domestic political agendas at the EU level have also been raised on several occasions by European officials. This divergence in EU treatment illustrates how enlargement outcomes are shaped not only by formal accession criteria, but also by the strategic calculations of member states and the broader geopolitical context. It is supposed that this divergence stems from the EU's interests in natural resources, abundant in Ukraine, and its lack of strategic interest in Macedonia. Consequently the fact that EU has no dependence on Macedonia, but does on Ukraine (for some issues), has shaped the EU's policy toward the two countries. Macedonia appears to have little exclusive value to offer the EU. From a geopolitical standpoint, Macedonia is a landlocked country with limited transportation infrastructure. Although Corridor 8 is an advantage, Corridor 10 remained in a stagnant state for decades. On the other hand, the two countries that delayed Macedonia's accession have greater importance for the EU, offering larger access to the

Mediterranean and Black Sea. Even though both countries had economic challenges and incomplete reforms at the time of their accession, they nonetheless became members largely due to the geopolitical interests of the period. Although Greece's accession raised concerns - particularly regarding agriculture and state support for favored industries - the European Council proceeded with enlargement. In fact, this decision was driven by the geopolitical motive of consolidating democracy in the region during the Cold War (Schramm, 2025). A similar situation occurred in the case of Bulgaria, which was integrated into EU despite significant and persistent deficiencies in the rule of law, particularly within key state institutions that persisted for many years after accession. The decision was largely driven by the goal of contributing to the regional stability and unification of the continent. Namely, access to the Mediterranean and Black Sea arguably played a significant role in EU decision-making, expanding the Union's borders toward the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean, and thus toward the Middle East and northeast Africa. Unlike these enlargements that extended the EU's territorial reach to new strategic frontiers, Macedonia's accession would not expand the Union's geopolitical space, as it is a landlocked country encircled by existing EU members (Greece and Bulgaria) and candidate states (Serbia and Albania). In its case, further EU enlargement toward the East is not feasible, since the Western Balkans form an enclave within the EU, and there are no imminent security threats comparable to those facing Ukraine. For this reason, the EU feels no urgency to integrate the region. Nevertheless, external influences from third powers should not be overlooked in protracted accession cases such as Macedonia's. Potential influences, particularly from Russia or China have in fact served as a motivating factor behind recent steps forward in Macedonia's Euro-integration process.

Unlike in the Macedonian case, the EU stands to gain significantly from Ukraine's accession, despite the substantial cost associated with post-war reconstruction. Among the key benefits are enhanced defense and security (given Ukraine's military experience which could strengthen the EU's geopolitical standing), energy resources (could accelerate the EU's path to energy independence), tech sector and wealth of critical raw materials (would boost technological innovation) (Khachatryan, 2024). Precisely because of these benefits, but also due to the ongoing war, the EU is already considering the possibility of invoking the provision of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, for circumventing Hungary's continued vetoes on Ukraine. Under Article 7(1), proceedings can be initiated if there is a "clear risk" of a serious breach of European values. This must be confirmed by a majority vote in the European Parliament. If the risk is confirmed, Article 7(2) allows for the European Council to find the accused member in breach. If that happens,

Article 7(3) enables the imposition of sanctions, including the suspension of voting rights.

It may be concluded that the results of the analysis elaborated in this paper reinforce the theory of intergovernmentalism related to EU integration, which posits that the states are the principal actors in the decision-making process, guided primarily by their own interests - a view consistent with the realist school of thought in international relations. Furthermore, EU policies toward Ukraine following the Russian invasion, and to some extent during Macedonia's internal conflict, confirm the realist assertion that states act primarily to maximize their security and power (in this case, the power of influence). This realist approach taken by the EU, aims to strengthen the Union's own geopolitical security by stabilizing and expanding its eastern borders, diminishing Russian influence, and stabilizing the Balkan region, long regarded as a "powder keg".

While economic development, democratic stability, and security remain fundamental conditions for all accession processes and are indeed relevant to both the Macedonian and Ukrainian integration paths, security appears to be the most influential factor, especially in the context of the post-invasion geopolitical landscape. The decisive role of geopolitical motives in shaping EU decision-making is further evidenced by the fact that following Russia's invasion, the EU explicitly began using terms such as "geopolitical" and "geostrategic" in its official policies.

## Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Macedonia and Ukraine demonstrates that EU enlargement process is shaped by a complex interplay of formal accession criteria, member state interests and broader geopolitical considerations. Macedonia's prolonged accession illustrates how bilateral disputes, intergovernmental vetoes and the strategic priorities of individual member states can stall integration, even when formal criteria are largely met. In contrast, Ukraine's accelerated accession trajectory highlights how external security threats and the EU's geopolitical imperatives can override conventional timelines and procedural norms, emphasizing the strategic, interest-driven dimension of enlargement.

These cases confirm both intergovernmental and realist perspectives: member states remain the principal actors in shaping EU enlightenment outcomes, while security and geopolitical considerations can decisively influence EU policy when urgency demands. The EU's differentiated approach - normative and rules-based in Macedonia yet strategically accelerated in Ukraine -underscores its dual role as both a normative actor and a geopolitical power.

Ultimately, the experiences of Macedonia and Ukraine suggest that the credibility and consistency of EU enlargement policy depend on the Union's ability to balance normative commitments with strategic interests. For policymakers, these cases offer important lessons: enlargement cannot be understood solely through legal frameworks or institutional procedures; it must be analyzed in light of the dynamic and sometimes conflicting interests of member states, regional security considerations, and broader geopolitical developments.

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