

Faculty of Law, Goce Delcev University, Stip



BALKAN

SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW



Vol.27

June 2026

Balkan Social Science Review © 2026 Copyright Goce Delcev University, Stip, North Macedonia. Address of the Editorial office: Faculty of Law, Goce Delcev University Stip, Krste Misirkov bb, PO box 201, 2000, Stip, North Macedonia www.ugd.edu.mk



URL: <http://js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/BSSR>

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Proofreading – Kristine WHITNABLE

The journal is indexed in the following bases: SCOPUS, HeinOnline,
EBSCO, CEEOL and Index Copernicus.

ISSN 1857-8799 printed version

ISSN 1857-8772 online edition

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**NORMATIVE VERSUS GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE EU
ENLARGMENT PROCESS
(SLOVAK AND MACEDONIAN CASE)¹**

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Macedonia and Slovakia in the context of European integration process, focusing on Copenhagen criteria condition of minority protection. This comparative analysis identifies key constraints and facilitating factors in both cases and situates them within intergovernmentalist and realist interpretations of EU enlargement, including its procedural standards and strategic considerations.

In both countries, minority issues were condition for EU accession and addressed through legal measures. After resolving the Hungarian minority issue in Slovakia and the Albanian minority issue in Macedonia, Slovakia advanced to EU membership in 2004, while in Macedonia (fifteen years after receiving candidate status and prior to the opening of accession negotiations) in 2020, a new minority issue emerged and was introduced as a condition, delaying the country's further progress in this process.

By applying intergovernmental and realist theories, the analysis in this paper explores whether EU enlargement depends on common EU policies, i.e. formal criteria, or whether individual interests and policies have a greater impact. The findings show that in the Slovak case, in addition to standard criteria, the geopolitical context plays an influential role in the country's integration, while the progress of North Macedonia's accession, bilateral issues with certain EU member states are more considered than progress in fulfilling formal criteria.

Overall, the results show that, in addition to legal standards, individual interests of certain countries and geopolitical factors can influence the pace and dynamics of EU enlargement.

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

1 INTRODUCTION

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 in comparative framework. Numerous works examine the Eastern enlargement, the accession process of Western Balkan countries, but there is still a lack of comparative analyses that explore the geopolitical dimension of EU enlargement across different enlargement packages.

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Slovakia and North Macedonia (hereafter Macedonia)⁴ focusing on how minority issues influenced their EU accession trajectories. In both cases, minority issues were raised from the outset as a prerequisite for progress in the accession process and were addressed through legal measures. The Hungarian issue in Slovakia was resolved by implementation through the of Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation and the adoption a law on linguistic minorities, while the Albanian issue in Macedonia was addressed through the implementation of the provisions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. What distinguishes the two cases is that in Macedonia, just before the opening accession negotiations an additional request emerged, posing a new condition for the country's further progress in the EU accession process. The new request related to minority issue was not raised by the Bulgarians (0.19%) live in Macedonia itself, but by Bulgaria after it became an EU member state (and it emerged immediately following the resolution of the decades-long dispute between Macedonia and Greece). The Bulgarian requests effectively created a new condition for Macedonia's further EU integration.

In contrast, in Slovakia, the Hungarian minority sought additional minority rights, receiving support from Hungary, while the resolution of the minority issue occurred through a more coordinated and mutually agreed approach, particularly given that both countries were members of the Visegrad Group.

Considering the EU's position on minority issues and theoretical debates between intergovernmentalism and realism, the aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between the credibility of EU conditionality and rule adoption and to assess whether the conditionality of the EU accession process is driven more by the interests of individual member states or by the Union's collective policies, and whether geopolitical factors influence the integration process.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a two-case study analysis and a comparative method to examine the European Union accession processes of Slovakia and Macedonia. The cases are selected due to their commitment to European integration, and the minority issue, which in both cases constitutes a condition for integration.

The divergence in their accession outcomes enables an assessment of the impact of individual member interests and geopolitical considerations on the enlargement process.

The period of analysis covers the period from the beginning of the 1990s, (when the two countries became independent), until the EU integration in Slovak case, and opening of negotiation accession in Macedonian case. This period includes the Slovak European integration process, which was finalized in 2004, and the Macedonian accession, which is still ongoing (2026). Source selection is designed to ensure balanced coverage of both the legal-institutional and political dimensions of enlargement.

The research findings are interpreted through a dual theoretical framework: intergovernmentalism, as applied in EU integration studies, emphasizes the central role of member states in shaping enlargement decisions, while realist approaches in international relations highlight security considerations and the pursuit of national interests as persistent drivers of state behaviour.

Employing these complementary perspectives allows the study to assess whether EU enlargement outcomes are more closely associated with the strategic preferences of individual member states or with the Union's normative objectives related to democracy and the rule of law.

The analysis focuses on minority rights as one of the key components of EU political conditionality. To examine the impact of this condition on the accession processes of Slovakia and Macedonia, the study applies Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's External Incentives Model (EIM). The model assumes that the EU drives Europeanization through sanctions and rewards that alter the cost-benefit calculations of domestic actors (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, *The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: the External Incentives Model Revisited*, 2017). According to the model, compliance with EU requirements depends primarily on two factors: the credibility of EU conditionality and the domestic political costs of rule adoption. These costs increase the more that EU conditions negatively affect the security and integrity of the state, the government's domestic power base and its core political practices of power preservation.

The paper is divided in three sections. The section, *Slovakia and Macedonia in EU accession process*, presents a structured chronological account of each country's engagement with the EU. Its purpose is to compare patterns and pace of progress from the conclusion of initial contractual agreements to the current stage of relations. The analysis in this section is primarily based on formal legal instruments, including Stabilisation and Association Agreements, Europe Agreements, Accession Partnership frameworks, and official EU enlargement strategy documents. The section, *The implementation of minority rights solutions in Slovakia and Macedonia* analyses national legislation, bilateral agreements, and policies related to minority issues, as well as EU reports assessing the progress achieved in both countries. The section, *Geopolitical aspects of EU enlargement*, focuses on the geopolitical context shaping the accession processes of Slovakia and Macedonia. It draws on European Commission progress reports, Council conclusions, and enlargement policy

papers, bilateral agreements, national policy documents, and relevant secondary academic studies that address EU enlargement, intergovernmental decision-making, and broader geopolitical dynamics. The Conclusion summarizes and compares the results of analysis in both cases, thought intergovernmental and realist perspectives.

3 SLOVAKIA AND MACEDONIA IN EU ACCESSION PROCESS

Slovakia and Macedonia became independent in the early 1990s following the dissolution of federal entities, with peaceful transitions compared to other post-socialist cases. The 1993 Copenhagen European Council established that accession requires stable democratic institutions, the rule of law, human rights and minorities protection, a functioning market economy and capacity to adopt EU obligations. (European Council, 1993) These criteria became central benchmarks for both countries' reform agenda.

1.1 Slovakia

In 1989, the Velvet Revolution led to the peaceful collapse of communist rule in Czech and Slovak Federation, initiating a democratic and market-oriented transformation. The country's strategic reorientation toward Western Europe was reflected in conclusions of Trade Agreement on Industrial Products, signed with European Community (1989), followed by Trade and Cooperation Agreement (1990) and European Agreement⁵ (1991). These agreements reflected the willingness of both sides to institutionalize political and economic relations and marked the beginning of EU accession process. Following the dissolution of Czech and Slovak Federation (1 January 1993), both successor states signed separate European agreements with the European Union (Eur Lex, 1993) and the Visegrad Group⁶, expanded into the Visegrad Four (V4). The Visegrad Group was created to coordinate political and economic reforms following the collapse of communist regimes and to facilitate faster integration into European and transatlantic institutions. The perception of this form of regional cooperation varied across the member states. In the case of the Slovak Republic, however, the Visegrad framework played a significant stabilising and corrective role. Slovakia's geographical position, particularly its borders with other Visegrad partners, especially Hungary and the Czech Republic, gives it strategic importance. After 1998, Visegrad cooperation functioned as a form of "safety net". In this context, it contributed to mitigating the risk of international isolation resulting from the foreign policy orientation of the Vladimír Mečiar's government (1994 – 1998) in the preceding period (Marušiak, 2005). Consistent with realist assumptions, participation in the Visegrad framework was considered a strategic choice aimed at preventing international isolation, strengthening Slovakia's security position and increasing its influence within the regional and European environment.

Despite the relatively cautious and at times obstructive approach to European and transatlantic integration during the period of government between 1994 and 1998, membership in the European Union remained one of the key priorities of Slovak foreign policy. It committed itself to fully implementing the Europe Agreement, approximating its legislation and standards to those of the EU, preparing for entry into the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), and proceeding with full trade liberalisation.

Slovakia presented its application for membership of the European Union on 27 June 1995, and its accession was seen as part of an historic process, in which the countries of Central and Eastern Europe overcome the division of the continent which has lasted for more than 40 years. During the 1990s, particularly under the government of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar⁷, Slovakia was temporarily excluded from first wave of East enlargement due to concerns related to democratic standards, governance, and minority rights (European Commission, 1997) . However, following the political change in 1998 under the government of Mikuláš Dzurinda, the country implemented substantial reforms and more consistently pursued its pro-integration policy towards NATO and the European Union. These efforts focused on strengthening democratic institutions, protecting minority rights, particularly those of the Hungarian minority, and aligning the legal framework with EU standards. The adoption of the minority language law played a crucial role in the accession negotiations, which were successfully concluded in 2002. Slovakia subsequently became a full member of the European Union in 2004, together with the other Visegrad Group countries (Mokrá & Kováčiková, 2023)

⁸

According to Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's External Incentives Model, Slovakia's exclusion from the first wave of enlargement represented a case of EU conditionality in practice, whereby the EU withheld the benefits of accession from a candidate country that failed to meet the required political criteria. At the same time, this exclusion increased the credibility of EU conditionality, led to election of a new European - oriented government and resulted in rule adoption driven by the prospect of obtaining EU membership reward.

1.2 Macedonia

Macedonia declared independence in 1991 and was the only republic of the former Yugoslavia that avoided direct military confrontation with the Yugoslav People's Army. Despite this relatively peaceful transition, the country faced serious international obstacles shortly after independence, primarily related to issues of international recognition and the dispute over its constitutional name. The formal establishment of relations with the European Union in 1998 through Cooperation and Transport Agreement and the subsequent signing of Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2001 (Eur-Lex, 2004) are considered key milestones in the launch of Macedonia's European integration process. The same year, the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) (Ohrid

Framework Agreement, 2001) became an integral part of this process, aiming to resolve the internal armed conflict⁹ and to lay the foundation for the development of a multiethnic society, democracy and closer integration with the Euro-Atlantic community. Through the lens of External Incentives Model, the OFA became fundamental criteria and element of EU conditionality. Progress in implementing the Agreement was closely linked to Macedonia's advancement in the EU integration process, as the EU made compliance with its provisions one of the key conditions for further progress toward membership. In recognition of progress in legislative alignment and the implementation of the OFA, Macedonia was granted EU candidate status in November 2005, but the start of negotiations was delayed for more of decade due to the unresolved name dispute with Greece. The deadlock was resolved in 2018 with the Final Agreement for the settlement of the differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a strategic partnership between the Parties (Prespa Agreement) (United Nations, 2018) and the constitutional change of the name in 2019, with replacing the words "Republic of Macedonia", with "Republic of North Macedonia". Although this change led to the country's membership in NATO, it did not change anything in the European integration process. In 2019 France¹⁰, Denmark and the Netherlands opposed opening accession talks with Macedonia and Albania, despite positive Commission assessments, prompting criticism from the European Parliament, which warned that such decisions undermine EU credibility and should be based on merit rather than domestic political concerns (European Parliament, 2019). Following the European Commission's strategy *Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans* (European Commission, 2018), EU leaders approved the opening of negotiations in March 2020. However, in November, Bulgaria vetoed the negotiating framework citing insufficient implementation of the 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation signed between Bulgaria and Macedonia (hereafter Treaty of Friendship) (United Nations, 2017), a veto maintained throughout 2021, despite calls from the EU Council Presidency that bilateral disputes should not obstruct the enlargement process. The deadlock was partially resolved in June 2022, with the acceptance of the French proposal¹¹ leading to the formal start of negotiations in July 2022 and the completion of screening in December 2023. While the 2025 report (European Commission, 2025) notes active engagement with the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, no new negotiation clusters have been opened due to the incomplete implementation of the French proposal.

In line with the External Incentives Model, the Greek veto and the conditionality that emerged from it (including the name change and the earlier change of the state flag) contributed to a reduction in the credibility of both the EU and its political conditionality. This was particularly evident after the name change, when Macedonia did not receive the expected "rewards" in the form of progress in the accession process and instead faced a further French veto. Such developments, together with the conditions arising from the Bulgarian veto,

make the Macedonian case a strong illustration of the model's argument, namely that the credibility of political conditionality decreases when the domestic political costs of compliance are high. Building on this analysis of veto-driven conditionality and declining credibility in the Macedonian accession process, the case further illustrates the intergovernmentalist perspective, according to which decision-making in EU integration is shaped by the preferences of individual member states, while supranational institutions play a secondary and largely coordinative role within the broader conditionality framework.

4 THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MINORITY RIGHTS SOLUTIONS IN SLOVAKIA AND MACEDONIA

Minority rights protection was a key element of EU conditionality in both Slovakia and Macedonia. Minority rights were addressed through a range of legal and institutional measures aimed at improving protection and representation of ethnic minorities as part of the EU accession process. While these measures contributed to Slovakia's successful accession in 2004, Macedonia later faced renewed minority-related conditionality in 2020, which significantly delayed its progress toward EU membership. The chapter compares the legal instruments, bilateral agreements, and policy frameworks adopted in both countries and assesses how political and geopolitical factors have influenced the interpretation and application of minority rights within the EU enlargement process.

1.1 Slovakia

Slovakia submitted its application for membership in the European Union on 27 June 1995. In its Opinion, the Commission assessed the Slovak application on its merits, applying the same criteria used for the other candidate countries whose applications were evaluated simultaneously (EU Commission, 1997). Based on this Opinion, Slovakia was not included among the countries with which the European Union opened accession negotiations (Pawera & Štefancová, 2014). In fact, the EU had made it clear as early as 1995 that Slovakia would not qualify without a thorough change in its domestic politics. The limited implementation of reform reflected the high perceived adoption cost for Mečiar government¹². The exclusion increased the credibility of EU political conditionality but alone was not sufficient to ensure rule adoption. Consequently, even though the credibility of EU conditionality was high, compliance depended on whether domestic political actors perceived the costs of adoption as acceptable.

Compliance with minority protection requirements became a significant factor in Slovakia's EU accession progress, as the European Commission regularly

monitored these issues in its annual progress reports. The issue primarily concerned two minorities: the Hungarian minority and the Roma minority. Although Slovakia ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in September 1995, it rejected the interpretation of Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1201 that was associated with collective minority rights and territorial autonomy (Driessen, 1997) . While the Roma minority continued to face discrimination, social exclusion, and high unemployment, alongside inadequate protection from violence, challenges related to the Hungarian minority stemmed from policy choices of governing political elites operating within a nationalist political climate. It illustrates the adoption of the Law on the State Language in 1995, which repealed the earlier provisions allowing the use of a minority language for official communications in any town or village where the minority represented more than 20% of the population. The situation was further aggravated by reductions in state subsidies for Hungarian cultural associations. Additional controversy emerged after the discontinuation of bilingual school reports in Hungarian-language schools, while non-compliance could result in disciplinary measures against teachers (Dostál, 1998; Driessen, 1997) . These measures were considered to be inconsistent with the Treaty on Good Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation between the Republic of Hungary and the Slovak Republic (hereinafter "the Treaty") (United Nations, 1995) establishing a framework for minority protection based on European standards and international law, signed in the same year. Within the broader European context, the Treaty was regarded as a significant diplomatic achievement and later served as a model for a similar agreement between Hungary and Romania. However, the Treaty was viewed critically by both parties, and the path towards its ratification was far from straightforward. Until 1992, there was little political willingness to adopt a bilateral agreement defining relations between the two countries. The Hungarian state regarded autonomy as the most appropriate solution to the situation of the Hungarian minority (Driessen, 1997) . Even some representatives of the Hungarian minority's political elite promoted concepts of autonomy, which were generally rejected by Slovak political representatives. On the other hand, Slovakia maintained that the regulation of minority rights constituted an internal matter of the state, while the government argued that minority rights were already sufficiently protected by existing Council of Europe instruments (Surová, 2020) . Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar frequently employed nationalist rhetoric concerning the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Minority rights protection was perceived more as a political issue than as a human rights issue (Petőcz, 2014) . The political climate of the period is reflected in the process of adopting minority rights legislation. One of the conditions for Slovakia's accession to the Council of Europe was the guarantee of minority rights protection. Relevant legislation was prepared and submitted to parliament. However, after Slovakia was admitted to the Council of Europe, the government withdrew the draft law (Driessen, 1997) . Despite this, the pressure from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the

European Union to adopt the treaty was reinforced by the statement made by French Prime Minister Édouard Balladur in 1995. He clearly stated that the European Union would not consider the applications of countries involved in border or minority disputes with neighbouring states. Minority rights functioned as an important, though uneven, democratization benchmark in the accession process. At the same time, the EU accession process became an effective mechanism for promoting their protection (Harris, 2007). As a result, the government of Vladimír Mečiar agreed to proceed with the treaty. After some domestic political obstacles, the agreement was ratified on 18 March 1996, albeit accompanied by a unilateral declaration that the Slovak side did not support autonomy or self-government based on ethnic principles and also rejected the concept of collective rights (Driessen, 1997).

Although Mečiar's stance indicates that the EU did not fully succeed in influencing his government's policies, however, Slovakia's exclusion from the first wave of enlargement had a significant impact on voters, increasing the credibility of EU conditionality and contributing to a shift in electoral preferences. According to the public opinion polls credibility and societal resonance played important role in the election of an EU integration - oriented government and had a significant impact on rule adoption (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*, 2005).

In the context of intensifying pressure from the European Union, the conflict between pro-European and nationalist political forces became a decisive factor in the 1998 elections. The subsequent change of government marked not only the inclusion of Hungarian political representatives in governing coalitions (1998–2006), but also a broader improvement in the quality of democracy. This development can be interpreted as an indicator of democratic consolidation and institutional maturation (Harris, 2007; Poláčeková, 2015). In addition, public administration reforms were adopted, the foundations of Hungarian higher education in Slovakia were established, the Act on the Use of Minority Languages was adopted, and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was ratified. It demonstrates that EU membership conditionality contributed to improvements in democratic governance in Slovakia, including greater respect for and strengthening of minority rights. However, after Slovakia's accession to the European Union, the Union lost much of its leverage to compel an existing member state to undertake more substantial reforms in the field of minority policy (Harris, 2007). This is one of the reasons why Slovakia still lacks a single codified minority law that would provide coherent legal and institutional guarantees for minority protection and equality (Szarka, 2014; Surová, 2020). Such Slovak conduct conforms to what Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier point out: that rule adoption had often remained superficial during the accession process and that implementation would stop or even reverse when EU conditionality weakened after accession (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, *The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: the External Incentives Model Revisited*, 2017).

1.2 Macedonia

Although the SAA signed between Macedonia and EU did not contain explicit provisions on minority protection, it required respect for minority rights in line with European and international standards. Following the conclusion of the OFA, this dimension was later addressed through the objectives of the CARDS programme and OFA policies. In accordance with the OFA, Macedonia introduced significant constitutional and legal amendments aimed at resolving minority-related tensions and strengthening a multicultural civic society. The Macedonian Constitution was amended to explicitly recognize non-majority communities (part of the Albanian people, the Turkish people, the Vlach people, the Serbian people, the Romany people, the Bosniak people and others) as constitutive part of the state, expand the protection of ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious identities, and ensure equitable representation in public institutions. Key changes included revisions to the Preamble and constitutional amendments on identity and symbols, allowing communities to use their emblems at the local level. Reforms on language rights, granting official status to any language spoken by at least 20% of the population, alongside Macedonian language and Cyrillic alphabet. These provisions were further elaborated through the Law on the Use of Languages (2018), which broadened the use of minority languages in public life. The OFA also strengthened minority rights in education by enabling state-funded higher education in minority languages (Albanian) and legalizing institutions such as the University of Tetovo. Additionally, the principle of equitable representation was introduced as a fundamental constitutional value, promoting proportional inclusion of non-majority communities in public administration, the police, and the military. Finally, decentralization reforms through laws on local self-government and territorial organization enhanced minority participation at the municipal level by lowering language-use thresholds and restructuring municipal boundaries. These constitutional and legal reforms positioned the OFA as the central framework for addressing minority issues, stabilizing interethnic relations in Macedonia and to enable closer and more structured integration between the country and the Euro-Atlantic community.

The OFA represents a practical application of EU represents a practical application of EU conditionality as explained by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's External Incentives Model. By tying progress in the accession process to the implementation of the Agreement, the EU established a system of external incentives in which compliance with political and institutional reforms was rewarded with closer integration and advancement toward EU membership. Nevertheless, despite progress in fulfilling the OFA requirements and thus complying with EU conditionality, the unresolved name dispute decreased the credibility and remained the key obstacle to the opening of accession negotiations. Following the name change and accession to NATO, hopes that EU accession would finally be unblocked, were once again dashed when Bulgaria vetoed the negotiation framework, citing insufficient

implementation of the 2017 Treaty. According to the Bulgaria's conditions, requests included adherence to agreed language formulations, the establishment of an implementation timeline for the bilateral treaty, and assurances that Macedonia would not support claims regarding a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. This development confirms what many authors generally recognize: that the EU treats candidate countries, differently regardless of similarities in their human rights records (Schimmelfennig, *Europeanization beyond Europe*, 2015). In the case of Bulgaria's integration, the Copenhagen criteria were not fully respected and no strict conditionality was imposed, while Bulgaria's demands extended beyond technical accession criteria and touched upon question of language, history, and national identity. Following Bulgaria's veto, two EU member states, Czechia and Slovakia, opposed the European Council's enlargement conclusions. They objected that the text as it stands, contained elements including the notion of falsifying history (related to Bulgaria) warning that such an approach could undermine the credibility of the enlargement process and create additional complications (EWB, 2020). Both states stressed that the EU should not act as an arbiter of historical interpretation, nor impose definitions and use of national identity or language. They will not allow that the Union be the judge of "our shared history, how we identify ourselves and the language we use".

The deadlock was partially resolved on 22 June 2022, when Bulgaria accepted the French proposal¹³, although subsequent protests in Macedonia opposed its implementation and the lifting of the Bulgarian veto. In the 2024 elections VMRO-DPMNE came to power and suspended implementation of the proposal, particularly regarding the constitutional inclusion of Bulgarians, which the Prime Minister of Macedonia Hristijan Mickoski has questioned, citing both, the small number of self-identified Bulgarians in Macedonia¹⁴ and 14 European Court of Human Rights judgments, on minority rights in Bulgaria (EUalive, 2025). Meanwhile¹⁵, the Council of European Committee of Ministers continued to stress Bulgaria's non-compliance with European Court of Human Rights judgments, including repeated concerns over the refusal to register associations linked to the recognition of a Macedonian minority.

The failure to fulfil promises after the name change, Bulgaria's non-compliance regarding judgments, and the EU's failure to take measures, affect the credibility of EU conditionality toward Macedonia and reduce Macedonia's willingness to comply with it. Research results show a change in public opinion in Macedonia regarding EU membership over the period from 2009 to 2021. The results indicate a decline in support for EU membership from 95% in 2009 to 74% in 2020, reaching 71% in 2021 (Sydoruk, Yakymchuk, & Avhustiuk, June 2022).

In February 2026 amendments proposed by European Parliament rapporteur Thomas Waitz called for limiting the influence of bilateral disputes on enlargement, clarifying the legal status of the Bulgaria-Macedonia protocol and reducing unanimity requirements in certain accession-related decisions¹⁶. These proposals reflect broader concerns regarding the impact of bilateral disputes on the credibility and effectiveness of the EU enlargement process.

However, the Macedonian government continues to signal reluctance to proceed with constitutional amendments without guarantees against future vetoes or additional conditions from Bulgaria.

5 GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF EU ENLARGEMENT

The European Union originated with six founding states following the signing of the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. Since then, the Union has expanded through seven successive enlargement waves. Each enlargement reflected distinct geopolitical contexts and was shaped by variations in the candidates' levels of economic development, political systems, historical legacies, and ideological orientations, as well as by the strategic interests of existing EU member states. The Slovakia's accession was part of the fifth enlargement which was explicitly geopolitical, aiming to stabilize post-socialist Europe, consolidate democratic transitions, and anchor Eastern Europe states within the Euro-Atlantic political and economic order. By contrast Macedonia is still at an early stage of the accession process, although its EU association process began in 2001 as a part of Stabilization and Association Process, a framework designed for Western Balkans countries, and later continued within the Berlin Process.¹⁷

1.1 Slovakia

Slovakia's accession to the European Union had several specific geopolitical dimensions.

First, following the end of the Cold War, the countries of the European Union were more concerned about internal political instability in post-communist countries and tensions between neighbouring states than about a global conflict between Russia and the West (Duleba et al., 1998). The EU aimed to promote democratic consolidation and political stability in post-communist Europe through accession conditionality, which would ensure political stability not only within the Central European region, but throughout Europe (Bilčík, 2014). Political requirements concerning the rule of law and democracy were clearly proclaimed in the Copenhagen criteria and embodied in the *acquis communautaire* (Council of the European Union, 2001). These also included the already mentioned rights of national minorities and the resolution of conflicts between neighbouring states. Since the decision to enlarge the European Communities to include post-communist countries in June 1993, attention was directed particularly towards Slovakia, which between 1993 and 1997 received several warnings from the European Union regarding the deteriorating development in the areas of the rule of law, democracy, and minority rights (Harris, 2007; Mokr & Kovikov, 2023).

Second, the integration of post-communist countries into the European Union also had an important security dimension. Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, several smaller sovereign states emerged in Central and Eastern Europe

that became subjects of geopolitical interest for major powers (Duleba et al., 1998). EU enlargement reflected broader geopolitical considerations related to the incorporation of Central and Eastern Europe into Western political and security structures, while simultaneously reducing Russian influence in the region. For the V4 countries, including Slovakia, integration into European and transatlantic structures represented a more attractive alternative than options such as neutrality or exclusively Central European forms of cooperation (Duleba et al., 1998). The European Union's favourable stance toward Slovakia's accession was also evident following its exclusion from the first enlargement wave, as Slovakia was continuously assured that it remained eligible and in principle welcome to join, provided that a change of government occurred (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe, 2005). Consequently, the process of integration into the European Union became closely linked to the ambition of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Alner, 2014). Although Slovakia's significance within the EU remains limited, the country currently constitutes part of the eastern border of both the European Union and the Schengen Area, giving it continuing strategic importance in the context of European security (Valášek, 2021).

Third, some analysts interpret the cultural or civilisational aspect of enlargement (Duleba et al., 1998; Alner, 2014). They consider Slovakia to be part of Western civilisation; therefore, in addition to political, security, and economic reasons, the sharing of civilisational values is also important. The European Union is often perceived as the institutional embodiment of Western European culture and civilisation, based on Latin Christianity, European humanism, and the ideas of modern democracy and freedom (Duleba et al., 1998). The integration of the V4 countries is thus regarded as a natural cultural choice, despite certain cultural specificities of the individual Central European countries. However, with the passage of time, it has become apparent that many citizens in Slovakia and in the other V4 countries (with the exception of Poland) tend to sympathise with Russia. According to a 2020 survey by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (Šimalčík & Šebok, 2025), as many as 47.4% of Slovaks perceived Russia positively. Although support declined to 29.3% following the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine, this still represents the highest level of support within the V4. It may be argued that part of the sympathy towards Russia stems from conservative attitudes and scepticism towards liberalism and the West (Marušiak, 2023). Finally, Slovakia's integration into the European Union must also be viewed in the context of the Central European space, which was partially institutionalised through cooperation within the Visegrad Group (or Visegrad Four - V4). Before accession to the European Union, the priority of meetings between government representatives was the successful management of accession negotiations with the EU and NATO (Dangerfield, 2008; Törő et al., 2014). The V4 countries were aware that it was in the economic and political interest of all of them to cooperate and enter the EU and NATO together. From this perspective, this particularly benefited Slovakia, which, after the critical years of Vladimír

Mečiar's government, caught up with the other candidate countries. The V4 could be considered a catalyst for the successful integration of Slovakia into Euro-Atlantic structures (Marušiak, 2005). Following accession to the European Union, the Visegrad cooperation had to redefine its priorities and identify new areas and motivations for cooperation. Although the V4 countries mainly pursue their own national interests, they still cooperate on issues where they share common interests and consider joint action advantageous (Dangerfield, 2014). As a result, V4 cooperation gradually shifted from the agenda of preparation for EU accession towards external foreign policy cooperation within the EU framework, such as the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy or EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans (Bauerová, 2018; Dangerfield, 2014; Törö et al., 2014). At the same time, however, the V4 has been unable to formulate common positions on issues where member states hold divergent preferences, particularly regarding relations with Russia (Maksak, 2023).

5.2 Macedonia

The Stabilisation and Association Process (1999), was the first EU policy framework through which Macedonia entered integration process, aiming at regional stabilisation and gradual EU association. Macedonia signed the first Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2001 during an internal armed conflict, which reinforced EU engagement by linking accession prospect to stability. This approach was confirmed at the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council which stated that the Western Balkans' future lies in EU (European Commission, 2003) and Macedonia received candidate status to in 2005.

Following the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation (Serbia and Montenegro became independent) in 2006, and the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, the Western Balkans increasingly came to be perceived as a geographical and political enclave within the EU. Croatia exited this framework through its EU accession in 2013, while Kosovo became new independent entity in 2008. Except for unresolved Serbia-Kosovo relations, the region has largely ceased to represent a source of immediate security or military instability. This relative stabilization contributed to a reorientation of the EU's enlargement policy, shifting emphasis from geopolitically driven expansion towards a more conditional, merit-based, and cautious accession process. Following Croatia's accession in 2013 and Jean-Claude Juncker's 2014 agenda, enlargement lost institutional priority, with Juncker later confirming that the no further enlargement would occur during his mandate. In 2018, the Commission reaffirmed a merit-based enlargement perspective, stressing the need to resolve bilateral disputes before accession. However, persistent divisions among member states became evident at the October 2019 Council meeting, when France, the Netherlands and Denmark opposed opening negotiations with Albania and Macedonia. The French veto derives partly from strong public

scepticism in France toward EU enlargement. Surveys showed that most French citizens opposed admitting new members, linking enlargement with concerns about immigration. Political considerations also played a role: Macron's decision aligned with public opinion at time when his popularity had sharply declined due to the *Yellow Vest protests*, allowing him to reinforce his political strategy and rebuild domestic support while facing growing competition from Marine Le Pen (Jurczyszyn, 2019). Macron's decision-making illustrates that member states can use the veto power to advance domestic political interests, confirming the central role of national preferences in EU enlargement decisions.

After the end of Juncker's mandate, the EU introduced a revised enlargement methodology in 2020 (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2020) to strengthen the credibility and predictability of the accession process. Nevertheless, Macedonia's progress was again blocked by Bulgaria's veto highlighting the continued influence of member states over enlargement decisions. In parallel to these institutional dynamics, public opinion reveals significant divisions over EU enlargement. In 2021, only 46% of EU citizens supported further enlargement, with the lowest support found in Western and Northern Europe (Sydoruk, Yakymchuk, & Avhustiuk, June 2022). Together with bilateral disputes and inconsistent member-state positions, these factors have weakened the credibility of enlargement and demonstrate that accession outcomes are shaped not only by formal conditionality but also by domestic political considerations within the EU.

Progress related to Bulgaria's veto was achieved during the French Presidency of the Council in 2022, coinciding with the granting of candidate status to Ukraine following Russia's invasion. In fact, the Russia-Ukraine war reasserted the geopolitical relevance of enlargement, particularly in limiting Russian influence in the Western Balkans. In this context, EU High Representative Josep Borrell described enlargement as a strategic necessity, emphasizing the region's alignment with EU positions on Russia as evidence of its commitment to shared European values (Delegation of European Union to North Macedonia, 2022).

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the geopolitical environment changed dramatically. The war increased the perception of direct security vulnerability in Europe, leading even traditionally enlargement-sceptic member states to reconsider the strategic importance of stability in the Western Balkans. In realist terms, this reflects a shift in the external security environment that altered state preferences and increased the perceived utility of enlargement as a tool for regional stabilization and balance of power management. As a result, Macedonian accession process and regional stability were reframed not only as normative enlargement issue, but also as security imperatives linked to the broader European balance of power. This geopolitical urgency, which accelerated Ukraine's EU accession process and incentivized France to facilitate the resolution of the Macedonian-Bulgarian dispute, demonstrates how external security threats can reshape internal EU decision-making. A

similar situation in which security prevailed over normative conditions was evident in the case of Bulgaria integration. Bulgaria was integrated into EU despite significant and persistent deficiencies in the rule of law, particularly within key state institutions many of which continued long after accession. This EU decision was largely driven by the objective enhancing regional stability and by Bulgaria's geopolitical importance to the EU. Indeed, this enlargement round extended the EU's territorial reach to new strategic frontiers, particularly the Black Sea region.

French President Macron, who had previously blocked the accession talks with Albania and Macedonia in 2019, later called for new members to be admitted "as swiftly as possible", while German Chancellor Scholz framed enlargement as essential for lasting peace in response to Russia's war of aggression (Buras, 2023). This shift in rhetoric at the EU level gains additional relevance when compared with earlier warnings from Western Balkan leaders about the Union's declining engagement in the region. This statement partly coincides with warnings by Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov (2009- 2019) who, during his second mandate criticized the EU for its low level investment and declining interest in integration of the Western Balkans, which according to him, Russia and China could use for their own purposes (Sydoruk, Yakymchuk, & Avhustiuk, June 2022). At that time, these concerns did not generate a significant response from EU member states, suggesting that the perceived threat to core European interests remained limited. From a realist perspective, this suggests that the perceived level of threat to core EU security interests was still considered low or indirect and therefore did not trigger strategic mobilization.

Enlargement formally returned to the EU agenda in November 2023, with adoption of the *Growth Plan for Western Balkans* (European Commission, 2023) which seeks to integrate the region into the EU's single market, deepen reforms and accelerate socio-economic convergence through increased pre-accession funding. In October 2024, the Commission approved the reform agendas of several Balkan states, including Macedonia and ensured support through the *Plan for the Western Balkans*. Moreover, the appointment of a Commissioner for Enlargement Ursula von der Leyen and framing of enlargement as a moral, political, and geostrategic imperative in the *Commission's 2025–2029 Political Guidelines* (European Commission, 2025) confirm that enlargement is not only a procedural process, but is increasingly viewed as a strategic tool, explaining the differentiated and accelerated approach applied to Ukraine in response to heightened security concerns.

CONCLUSION

Considering the presented arguments, this section compares the findings from Slovak and Macedonian cases through the lenses of intergovernmentalism, realism and the External Incentives Model with particular attention to how EU conditionality operates in different geopolitical context.

Slovakia's exclusion from the first wave of EU enlargement illustrates the operation of the External Incentives Model in practice, as the EU used conditionality to withhold membership benefits until political criteria were met. This exclusion strengthened the credibility of EU conditionality and incentivized the post-1998 government to implement substantial democratic and institutional reforms. In line with the EIM logic, key reforms, including the adoption of the Minority Language Law, demonstrate rule adoption, driven by the credible prospect of EU membership. In fact, pressure from the European Union on the government of Vladimír Mečiar (1994–1998) led not only to the adoption of international legal commitments on minority protection but also became an important factor in mobilising the pro-European segment of the population. Minority rights thus functioned both as a normative benchmark and as a political instrument within the enlargement process (Harris, 2007). At the same time, pro-European parts of society increasingly responded to the critical assessments of the Slovak government by the European Commission and gradually expressed stronger opposition to the nationalist policies of Vladimír Mečiar. After the 1998 elections, Mečiar was unable to form a government, and his opponents, including representatives of the Hungarian minority, established a pro-European coalition that initiated economic and political reforms, thereby enabling Slovakia to join the first wave of candidate countries acceding to the European Union in 2004 (Mokrá & Kováčiková, 2023).

In contrast to Slovakia, the Macedonian case illustrates a weakening of the External Incentives Model logic. If the credibility of EU conditionality was high during the period when the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement was set as a condition for progress and led to the granting of candidate status, subsequently the Greek veto and the associated conditionality, including the name and flag changes, reduced the credibility of EU rewards, particularly as expected progress in the accession process did not follow. Subsequent delays and further vetoes, including the French and Bulgarian ones, reinforced this pattern. The Macedonian case demonstrates that when domestic political costs of compliance are high and EU incentives are perceived as uncertain or delayed, the credibility of political conditionality declines and the effectiveness of rule adoption is significantly weakened. The demands concerning the name, history, language, and constitutional changes create substantially higher domestic political costs because they directly affect issues of national identity. According to the External Incentive Model, high domestic political costs and the weakened credibility of EU membership caused by Greek and Bulgarian vetoes reduced the likelihood of rule adoption and delayed Macedonia's accession process. The Macedonian case also reveals the limited independent role of supranational institutions like the European Commission, since even official EU processes were affected by member states and some disputes were handled outside the EU, for example through United Nations mediation.

Regarding the obstruction to Macedonia's accession process, originating from both Greece and Bulgaria, it is must that no previous round of EU enlargement required a candidate country to question the existence of its own language,

revise elements of its historical narrative or modify its national name (Greek dispute case). In the case of Macedonia, Bulgaria transformed historical and identity-related issues into formal accession conditions, revealing the limitations of the EU's rule-based enlargement framework and the weakness of smaller candidate states in an intergovernmental decision-making system.

In the Slovak case, which also included conditions related to the Hungarian minority issue, despite occasional bilateral tensions over minority rights, resolved through the adoption of a minority language law, Hungary ultimately supported Slovakia's EU and NATO membership, demonstrating that regional cooperation and shared strategic objectives can prevail over bilateral disputes. By contrast, Bulgaria uses its position to impose conditions on Macedonia and has repeatedly linked its consent for opening and advancing accession negotiations to the resolution of bilateral disputes.

However, from an intergovernmentalist perspective, the Slovakia's accession process was also strongly shaped by key member states, which influenced enlargement dynamics through bilateral pressure and political preferences. This remained the case despite the existence of a clearly defined legislative, institutional, and procedural framework created by the European Union. The importance of political will and dynamics is well illustrated by the pressure exerted by French Prime Minister Édouard Balladur on Slovak and Hungarian political elites to conclude a treaty regulating bilateral relations. At the same time, political elites and national interests within the Visegrad Group (V4) played an important role, as these countries in the 1990s coordinated their efforts towards joint accession to the European Union, which was ultimately achieved in 2004 (Bauerová, 2018). From realist perspective participation in the Visegrad framework can be identified as a strategic choice aimed at preventing international isolation, strengthening Slovakia's security position and increasing its influence within the regional and European environment. At the same time, the realist dimension is visible in the broader post-Cold War context, in which EU enlargement served as a tool for stabilising Central and Eastern Europe and securing a geopolitical zone of influence. The process of Slovakia's accession to the European Union took place in a geopolitically dynamic period. Just as European integration after the Second World War aimed to secure peace in Europe through economic cooperation, in the post-Cold War context the integration of post-socialist countries became one of the key instruments for stabilising the geopolitically significant region of Central and Eastern Europe. Even after the Commission and the European Council decided not to invite Slovakia to accession negotiation in 1997, the EU continued to assure Slovakia that it was eligible and in principle welcome to become member. This development demonstrates that Slovakia's integration into European Union was in the interest of both parties.

It can therefore be argued that the success of Slovakia's accession process depended on a number of factors, ranging from domestic political developments in both candidate and member states, through the actions of key political actors, to the functioning of specific mechanisms within the European

Union. Moreover, the entire process unfolded within a distinct geopolitical as well as political-cultural context.

Slovakia's accession to the European Union also brought a number of challenges for the country itself, for the Central European region, and for the EU as a whole. As a member state, Slovakia became a co-creator of European policies and part of the EU's decision-making framework, and is therefore less exposed to the external pressure it faced as a candidate country, particularly in relation to minority rights, which had previously functioned as a key benchmark of EU conditionality. At the same time, this requires a responsible policy approach, as national decision-making, particularly in the fields of foreign and security policy, can significantly influence the direction of the European Union as a whole.

Following several rounds of enlargement, the EU has encountered increasing difficulties in reaching unified positions, both internally and externally. This is particularly evident in the differing positions of Slovakia and the majority of EU member states regarding relations with Russia, demonstrating the continued importance of national interests in EU decision-making. Finally, following the accession of Slovakia and the other Visegrad countries to the European Union, it became necessary to redefine cooperation within the Central European region. While the V4 countries continue to identify areas in which they can act collectively, such as the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood policy, this cooperation remains weakly institutionalised and frequently constrained by diverging national interests (Dangerfield, 2014).

Overall, the Slovak case demonstrates that EU conditionality can be an effective tool for promoting democratic reforms and minority rights protection, particularly when supported by domestic political change. At the same time, accession to the European Union, and subsequently to the Schengen Area, contributed to the easing of tensions between neighbouring countries. However, the post-accession period also reveals the structural limits of this approach, as the Union's ability to influence further developments significantly declines once membership is achieved.

In contrast with Slovakia, the Macedonian experience suggests that the level of interest in EU membership has not been equally shared by both parties. During the early stages of the accession process, the Western Balkans, including Macedonia, occupied a more prominent place on the EU agenda due to the instability that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia. At the time of the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and Thessaloniki summit, the EU enlargement policy was primarily driven by security concerns and objective of regional stabilization, reflecting the geopolitical significance of the Western Balkans at that time. Over time, however, the geopolitical dimension of enlargement weakened, and the Commission increasingly focused on administrative and legislative reforms and the countries' capacity to implement EU rules (Lehne, 2020, October). From realist perspective this shift indicates that the strategic value of Macedonia for the EU declined as the immediate security threats in the region diminished. Unlike the previous enlargement rounds, Macedonia's future accession would not significantly

expand the Union's geopolitical space but rather fill a strategic gap within its territory. The renewed France-led effort in 2022 to facilitate a compromise between Macedonia and Bulgaria, emerged only after Russia's invasion to Ukraine had fundamentally altered the European security environment. In a context where the EU promoted a provisional compromise driven more by strategic urgency and regional stability concerns than by normative principles, the Macedonian issue may progress in response as a consequence of developments related to Ukraine.

The general conclusion is that Slovakia and Macedonia's progress toward EU membership has been shaped not only by compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, but also by the political preferences of individual EU member states (in the Macedonian case) and strategic interests (in the Slovakian case). The analysis results highlight that the national interests of member states and external security considerations shape enlargement outcomes beyond formal legal and normative criteria.

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