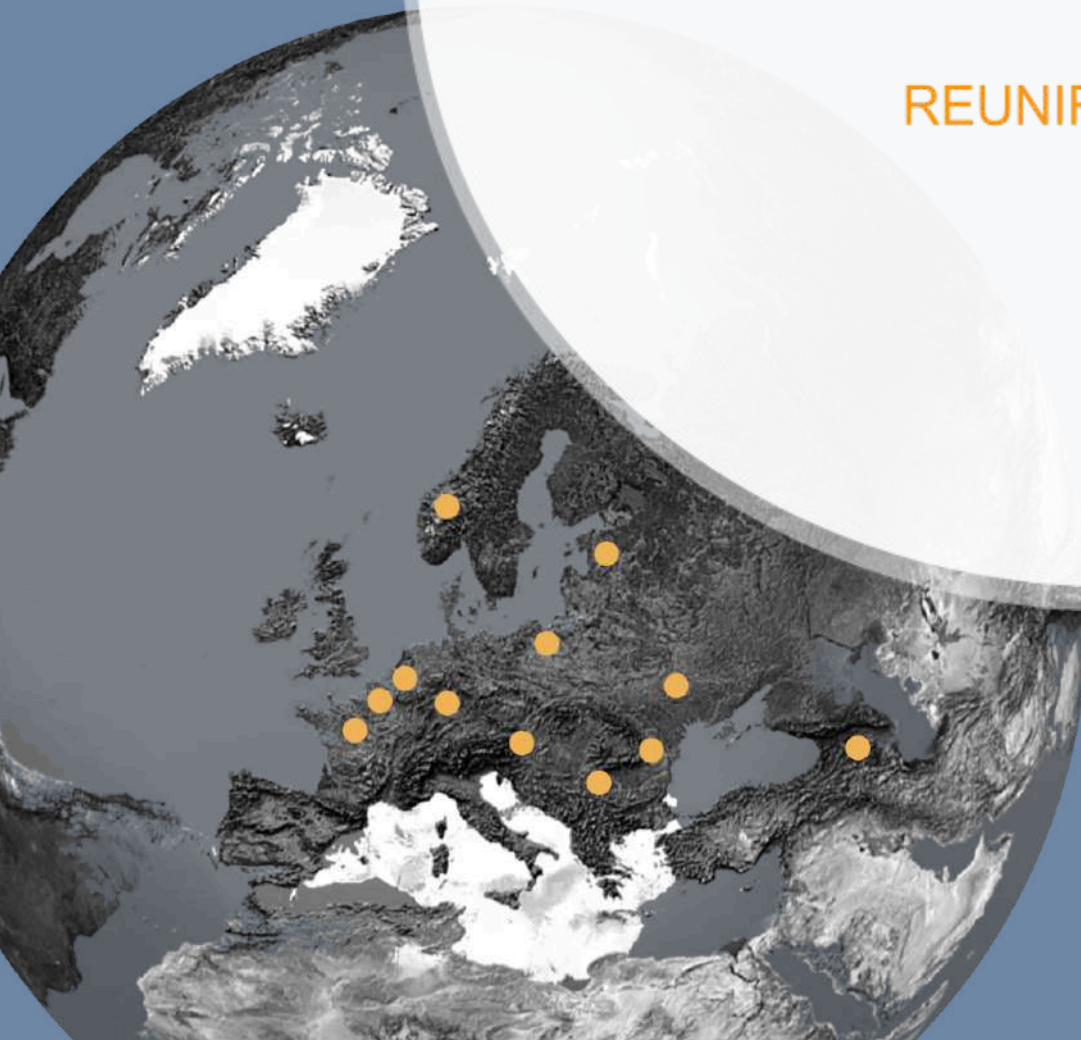




**EU ENLARGEMENT AND PUBLIC OPINION  
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: HOW TO  
COUNTER A TREND OF INCREASING  
DISTRUST**

REUNIR - Guest Policy Paper



**FILIPPO MARINONI**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

At the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit - also known as the “Thessaloniki Summit” - the EU pledged that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union”<sup>1</sup>. For more than 20 years though, the EU enlargement process has faced obstacles both within the EU and the Western Balkans Six (WB6)<sup>2</sup>. In the Western Balkan region, issues such as democratic backsliding, political fragmentation, corruption, and limited judicial independence have delayed alignment with EU standards. Economic convergence remains distant. Yet, the geopolitical scenario has seemingly given new momentum to the enlargement process, particularly since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022<sup>3</sup>. Enlargement is now regarded by Brussels as a [geostrategic investment](#) in peace, stability, and economic growth across Europe.

Within the EU, concerns over the Union's capacity to absorb additional members and the blocking strategies of some countries have fed feelings about “enlargement fatigue”<sup>4</sup> or even outright “enlargement resistance”<sup>5</sup>. No new members have joined since Croatia's accession in 2013, and before that, Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. To make the enlargement process more “credible, predictable, dynamic, and subject to stronger political steering”<sup>6</sup>, the Commission revised its enlargement methodology in 2020. In its intentions, this action should have enhanced credibility and trust on both sides. However, over the past five years, progress for the WB6 has remained limited. While the renewed enthusiasm for enlargement has led to some advancements since 2022, all the countries in the region still appear [far from being integrated](#), with Montenegro perhaps being the exception, [as it considered the frontrunner](#).

Against this backdrop, is the EU still perceived by WB6 citizens as the (desirable) destination of their countries’ journey? And, notwithstanding the slow progress in the enlargement process and the unmet promises of integration, is the EU still seen as a herald of benefits for both the candidate countries and their citizens? Additionally, are there significant differences in how public opinion across the six countries of the region perceives the EU?

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/pres\\_03\\_163](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/pres_03_163)

<sup>2</sup> With this label we refer to the six Western Balkan countries part of the enlargement: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

<sup>3</sup> Bonomi, M., & Rusconi, I. (2023). From EU ‘enlargement fatigue’ to ‘enlargement enthusiasm’? Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik. <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/from-eu-enlargement-fatigue-to-enlargement-enthusiasm/>

<sup>4</sup> O’Brennan, J. (2014). ‘On the Slow Train to Nowhere?’ The European Union, ‘Enlargement Fatigue’ and the Western Balkans. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 19(2).

<sup>5</sup> Economides, S. (2020). From fatigue to resistance: EU enlargement and the Western Balkans. The Dahrendorf Forum.

<sup>6</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sk/ganda\\_20\\_182](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/sk/ganda_20_182)

Assessing whether the EU is still perceived as a reliable partner by WB6 citizens and the ultimate destination of their countries' integration process is highly relevant as it helps to determine who still believes in EU accession (“accession optimists”) and who, on the contrary, opposes it or has little hope in its realisation (“accession pessimists”).

The level of societal support – or the lack thereof – is indeed a crucial element that cannot be overlooked by governments when aiming for a sustainable policy<sup>7</sup>. For the candidate countries to complete the European journey, positive citizen discourse and opinions about EU accession are pivotal factors. Indeed, the effectiveness and the mobilisation capacity of the civil society in the Western Balkans have been once again made clear with the mass protests that are taking place in Serbia.

## 2. 2024 BALKAN BAROMETER, THE RESULTS

To gauge perceptions of the EU and the “enlargement/accession fatigue”, polls such as the Eurobarometer and the [Balkan Barometer](#) serve as useful instruments. The latter, commissioned annually by the [Regional Cooperation Council](#), will be the focus of this analysis. In this first section, through the assessment of its latest edition, this paper takes stock of the current situation, while in the second section, the article identifies the trends in public opinion over the last ten years, by reviewing the results of the surveys from the past decade.

The situation within the WB6 region varies quite a lot, and each country's public opinion has its own peculiar stance towards the EU. At a first glance, the [2024 Balkan Barometer](#) shows optimism about EU accession among the WB6 citizens, with the regional average of 68% believing their countries will join the Union by 2040, though 18% think it will never happen (Fig. 1).

Over half (54%) view EU membership as beneficial for the country, while a smaller group (10%) sees it as detrimental (Fig. 2).

Economic prosperity is perceived as the crucial personal benefit of joining the EU, while other advantages of being EU citizens are identified in the freedom to work and study in the EU, and in the enhanced peace and stability that the accession would bring about (Fig. 3).

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<sup>7</sup> Dimitrova, A. & Kortenska, E. (2017). What do citizens want? And why does it matter? Discourses among citizens as opportunities and constraints for EU enlargement, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24:2, 259-277, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2016.1264082

However, the apparent optimism that stems from the analysis of the regional data must be nuanced through a comparison at the national scale.

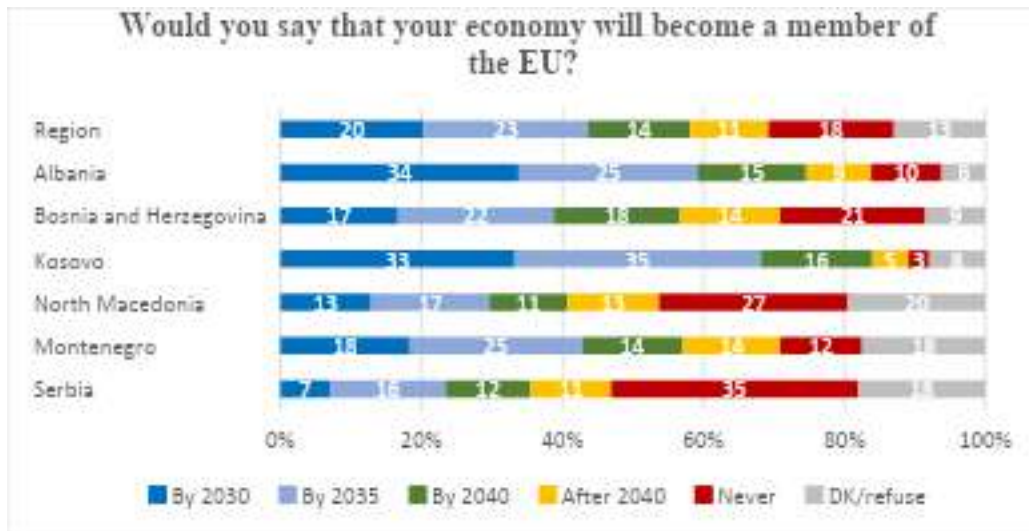


Figure 1

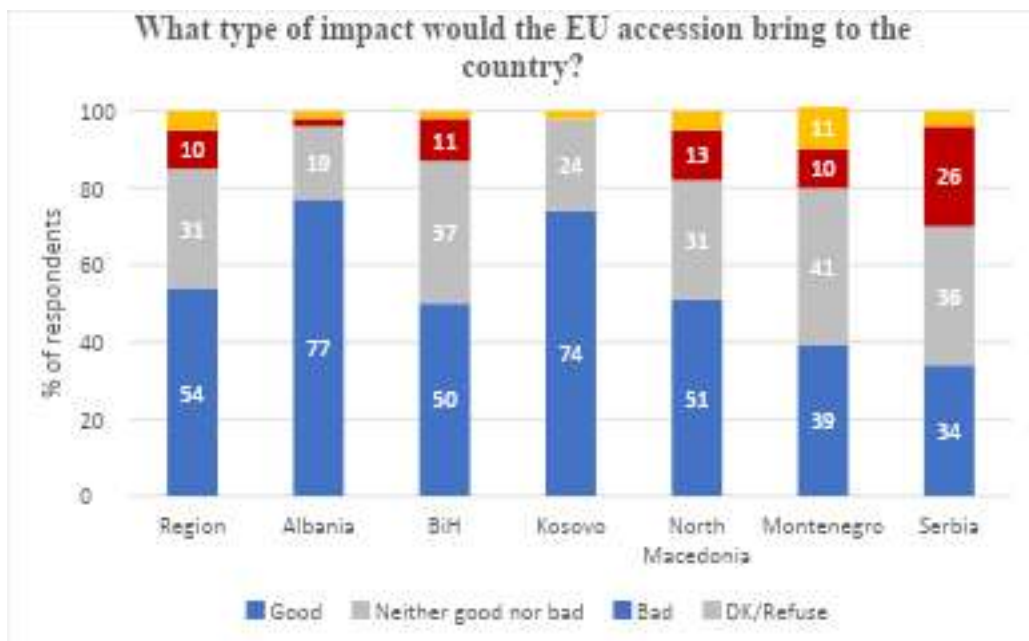
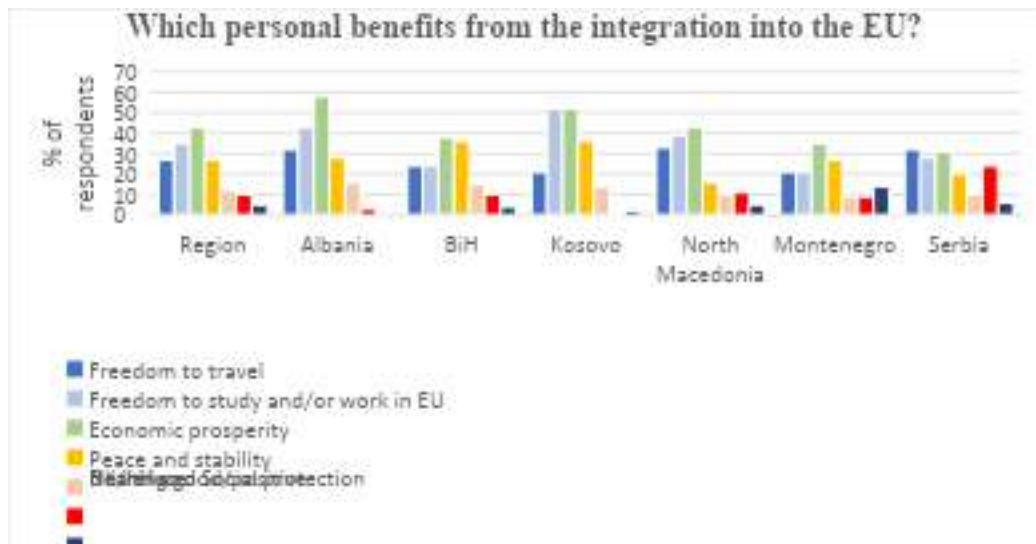


Figure 2



*Figure 3*

**Albanians'** optimism aligns with Prime Minister Edi Rama's efforts to position the country as a reliable EU partner, aiming to accelerate its accession. This determination is exemplified by the controversial 2023 Italy-Albania agreement on the management of migrant persons. This deal has been signed with Italian PM Giorgia Meloni, and both leaders cheered for Albania “acting as” an EU member state. Rama’s strategy is paying off – at least in the short term, since in October 2024 Albania finally obtained the green light to open the first negotiation cluster with the EU. To further demonstrate the favourable momentum, the College of Europe - renowned university institution of EU studies - has opened a new campus in Tirana, which is hosting the first promotion in the academic year 2024-2025. Other actions that are also believed to have played a major role in securing the EU’s unanimous backing to move forward with the opening of accession negotiations on Cluster 1. Cases in point are the “Belaris case” and Tirana’s readiness to address concerns over minority rights.

**Kosovars** remain confident that all the actual barriers to EU membership will eventually be lifted, thanks to the support of the EU. An important action in this direction was the removal of the visa needed by Kosovars to travel in the EU in January 2024. Public opinion appears optimistic even if Kosovo remains a "potential candidate" - the only one in the region - with five EU member states (Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Romania, and Cyprus) not recognising its sovereignty, alongside Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, two EU candidate countries.

On the other side of the spectrum, beyond being by far the most skeptical concerning the possibility of ever joining the EU, **Serbia’s** public opinion is also the most pessimistic on the potential benefits for the country and the citizens deriving from the accession. Reluctance in Serbia toward EU membership mirrors the government's opposition to align with key EU policies, most notably its decision not to adopt sanctions against Russia following the Ukraine invasion. Public opinion has long been shaped by national media, which were in full control of President Vučić’s Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), and



suffers the lack of a real better alternative. The alliances with China and Russia are presented as crucial for the economy and for the “territorial integrity” of Serbia, which means the non-recognition of Kosovo’s independence by Moscow and Beijing. Xi Jinping visited Vučić in Belgrade last summer, where the leaders recognised each other’s sovereignty over Kosovo and Taiwan, respectively. However, this political setup has been dramatically shaken by Serbian citizens. Mass protests have taken place following a school shooting in 2023, the rebooting of a lithium mine in summer 2024, and more recently (end 2024 – beginning 2025) following a train station canopy collapse in Novi Sad, which resulted in 15 fatalities and revealed the anger of Serbian civil society (initially led by the students) towards the government’s corruption. This round of mass protests is considered “historical” and directly targets President Vučić.

Whereas public opinions of the previous countries are in line with the pro- or anti-EU political dynamics of their governments, only 39% of the **Montenegrin** respondents believe that something good would come for the country in case of accession, while 41% think that neither good nor bad things would come from the integration. Thus, citizens’ opinion appears in contradiction with their government’s firm stance. Indeed, PM Miloško Spajić, - chief of “Europe Now!” (PES) party, elected in October 2023 - has immediately opted for a fully pro-EU approach. The lukewarm public opinion on the potential benefits of the accession derives partly from the ethnic composition of the country, in which the Serb component (some 33% of the population) is normally skeptical about the integration into the EU. Also, public opinion pessimism towards the EU could derive from a more general internal skepticism, which is related to PES’ controversial alliance with For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG) - a coalition of Serb nationalist parties, once allied with Russia and against NATO membership. For its part, the EU is satisfied with the performance of Montenegro in its accession process, which is considered by many the closest candidate to the accession.

Approximately half of respondents in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** believe in the positive impact of EU membership, and a slightly larger portion is optimistic that accession could occur before 2040. The little trust in the EU path is partly due to the complicated internal politics and to the form of state and government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, established with the 1995 Dayton Agreements. Serbian inhabitants (more than 30% of the total population), and among them mainly those from the Republika Srpska (RS), are substantially opposed to the alignment to Western policies and see strong allies in Orbán’s Hungary, Vučić’s Serbia, and Putin’s Russia, chiefly thanks to the advocacy actions of RS President Milorad Dodik. The other two constitutive peoples (Bosniaks and Croats) are mainly - but not fully - pro-EU. However, the latest events have heightened public opinion’s fear about a resurgence of political violence in Republika Srpska. In March 2025, Dodik was sentenced to one year in prison. In response, he enacted secessionist laws that prevent “the judiciary and state police from operating in RS”. Given Dodik’s risky move, a scared public opinion is no longer fully supporting its entity’s President. Additionally, Dodik failed to gain the external support he had hoped for, such as that from the US. The next Balkan Barometer survey (to be conducted in Spring of 2025 and published towards the end of the year) will gauge if this scenario shifts RS public opinion towards an increased EU accession optimism.



Only 40% of **North Macedonians** expect to be integrated into the EU by 2040, while 27% answered that the country will never join the EU. North Macedonians are frustrated by the lack of advancement in the integration process that has been lasting since 2005, when they received the candidate status. Their pessimism is justifiable by the Bulgarian blocking strategy; the latter is asking North Macedonia to include in its constitution the Bulgarians as a recognised minority people and to admit that Macedonian language has roots in Bulgarian language. As if it were not enough, North Macedonia has now officially been decoupled from Albania for EU negotiations, with Tirana advancing in the talks, while Skopje being stopped again.

### 3. TRENDS OF THE LAST 10 YEARS

The first von der Leyen Commission (2019-2024) put back on the agenda the future enlargement of the Union, after the Juncker Commission (2014-2019) closed the doors. However, as put forward by the BiEPAG<sup>8</sup>, “the past decade of ‘polycrisis’ has dampened the EU’s attractiveness”<sup>9</sup>. The limited ability of the Union to respond effectively to the recent several crises has undermined its appeal as a strong and united group of countries working together to further economic prosperity and political stability.

Overall, the analysis of the last ten Balkan Barometer surveys shows that, in the last decade, public opinion in the Western Balkans has been viewing EU integration as beneficial for their countries, though this optimism has diminished in recent years. The regional average has steadily declined from 62% in 2021 to 54% in 2024 (Fig. 5). This downward trend indicates a growing pessimism due to the “fatigue” with the EU enlargement process and a more general declining credibility of the EU, inter alia because of the bad management of the “polycrisis” towards the region. Moreover, Covid-19 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine can be identified as the two main recent divisive events in the WB6’ public opinion.

The percentage of accession pessimists is at its lowest in a decade, standing at 18% in 2024 (Fig. 4). While this may appear to signal renewed hope, the introduction of the new survey option in 2024 - accession "After 2040" - chosen by 11% of respondents in the region, likely shifted respondents from

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<sup>8</sup> The “Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group” is a group of policy analysts, scholars and researchers, established as a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans and the Centre for Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region.

<sup>9</sup> Stratulat, C., Kmezić, M., Cvijic, S., Vurmo, G., Bonomi, M., Nechev, Z., Wunsch, N., & Lavrič, M. (2021, November 26). Escaping the Transactional Trap: The way forward for EU Enlargement. European Policy Centre, available at: <https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2021/Escaping-the-transacional-trap.pdf>

the "never" category, suggesting a more nuanced outlook, but it still signals a widespread mistrust towards a fast integration.

Indeed, a consistent share of citizens (29%) believes that their countries will never join the EU or in any case not before 2040, thus demonstrating doubt to the [statement of the former President of the European Council Charles Michel](#), in which he claimed for the accession of the region by 2030.

Another worrying trend is the rising number of individuals who feel that EU integration would not bring any substantial change. This sentiment has grown from 26% in 2020 to 31% in 2024 (Fig. 5).

In the last five years, **Serbia** has always had the biggest share in the region of persons responding that joining the EU would bring nothing good or positive. Before the pandemic public opinion's attitude was considerably shifting towards a pro-EU stance<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 7). However, after the outbreak of the pandemic, [Chinese and Russian "COVID diplomacy"](#) has alienated the sympathy of EU from Serbians, and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been a major divisive element in public opinion. President Vučić's administration has reinforced an anti-Western sentiment, using state-controlled media to portray pro-Russian and pro-Chinese stances favorably, to the detriment of the EU's image. Overall, Vučić has become a master of the "balancing strategy"<sup>11</sup> in its international relations and is aware of Serbia's importance to the EU, as demonstrated by the [2024 lithium agreement](#). However, given the large ongoing protests, we will see if this approach is reaching a dead end. From the EU's perspective, the Commission has the possibility to up the pressure on the Serbian President.

On the other hand, in the last decade, **Albania's** and **Kosovo's** public opinions have clearly been the biggest supporters of the integration of their countries in the EU (Fig. 8). The two countries seem fully aligned both at the political and public opinion level with the EU. The EU in these two countries is seen as the only viable partnership for the future. In the last decade, advancements have been made, as Albania was granted candidate status in 2014, and after suffering the blow of being stalled by the European Council [in 2019](#), Albania has recently obtained the opening of the first negotiation cluster.

Concerning Kosovo, the Council "[took note](#)" of the self-declared independence in February 2008, without the possibility of officially endorsing it, mainly because of the [strong opposition of the Spanish foreign minister](#), which is enduring until the present days. This notwithstanding, the EU has

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<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to identify the reasons behind this rapid increase in the positive perception of the EU, because in those years the process of integration of Serbia was in a stalemate. Not even informal discussions with experts on the ground have led to identifying a precise reason.

<sup>11</sup> Kovačević, M. 2019. Understanding the marginality constellations of small states: Serbia, Croatia, and the crisis of EU-Russia relations. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 27(4): 1–16.

started working for the integration of the entity. It helps “[contribute to stability in Kosovo](#) through the EULEX rule of law mission”. Moreover, the EU has been engaged in high-level dialogues between Kosovo and Serbia, which culminated in the [Ohrid Agreement \(February 2023\)](#). Despite the ambiguity among member states, integration remains highly desirable and feasible for Kosovars for two key reasons, as identified by [Krasniqi \(2023\)](#). First, EU membership is “widely seen as constitutive of statehood” and aligns with Kosovo’s self-conception as a Euro-Atlantic partner. Second, the extensive Kosovar diaspora established within the EU serves as a significant political and cultural bridge with the Western world.

Over the last decade, **Bosnia-Herzegovina’s** and **North Macedonia’s** public opinion have been very fragmented and quite pessimistic on their possibility of accession and about the benefits their countries would obtain in being member states. On the Bosnian side, pessimism about EU accession and its potential benefits remained high in the period 2015-2022. This was likely fueled by the controversial management of the “refugee crisis” by the EU, which left [thousands of migrants stuck in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), either blocked in their attempt of entering Croatia or illegally pushed back from EU borders. Furthermore, the EU has long pressured Bosnia and Herzegovina to implement the 2009 European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling “[Sejdic-Finci](#)” - which implies reforming Bosnian sectarian political system, making this a prerequisite to join the EU. However, despite this pressure, the country has yet to enforce the sentence. No less important is the political challenge to the EU integration that comes from inside the country, namely by one of the two entities, Republika Srpska. In 2023, however, optimism increased because in December 2022 the EU has finally granted Bosnia and Herzegovina “candidate status” - until that moment, indeed, it was only a “potential candidate”. Moreover, the latest events may push the citizens of RS to detach from its anti-EU leader, fearful of the return of paramilitary violence.

On the North Macedonian side, the disenchantment about joining the EU is due to “pre-accession fatigue” - the country is a candidate member since 2005 - and to the reiterated blockages in its accession talks, by Greece (until 2018) and Bulgaria (ongoing), which have led public opinion to distrust Brussels. In Fig. 4 we can see a diminishing pessimism only in the aftermath of the 2018 [Prespa Agreement](#) with Greece on the name “North Macedonia”, and after its NATO accession in 2020. Apart from those periods, the accession pessimism is well above the regional average.

**Montenegro’s** condition is quite peculiar. While throughout the long leadership of Milo Đukanović the country has always been committed to the EU and, in 2003, even adopted the Euro as its currency, in the last ten years public opinion has remained on the regional average about the perceived benefits in the case of integration. The reason lies in a general distrust and disillusionment

towards the EU because of the lengthy process, as well as in the fact that some 33% of the population [considers itself as ethnically Serbian](#). This component of the population is cold about the integration of the country into the EU as it often adopts pro-Serbia and pro-Russia stances. In the last decade, the highest accession optimism among the population has been registered in 2018, after the country's 2017 NATO accession. While a slightly increased perception of the benefits deriving from accession (Fig. 6) in the period 2018-2023 could be due to the controversial Bar-Boljare highway project, signed with China, that ended up indebting Montenegro with China and forcing it to ask for help from the EU to repay it<sup>12</sup>.

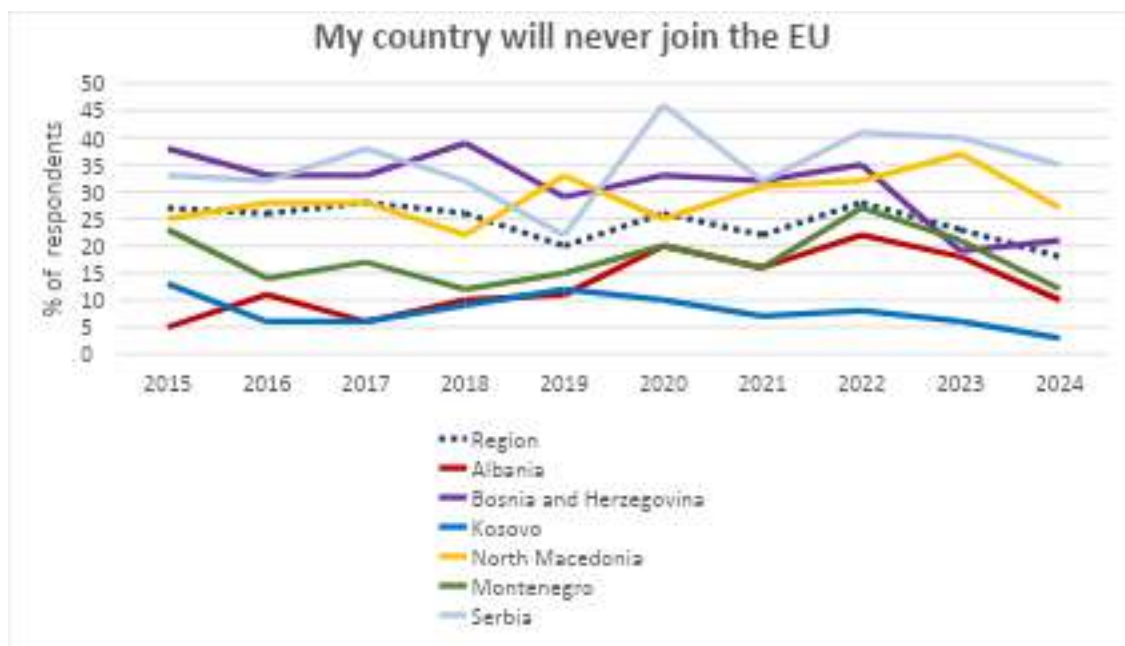


Figure 4

<sup>12</sup> Soyaltin-Colella, D. (2022). The EU Accession Process, Chinese Finance and Rising Corruption in Western Balkan Stabilitocracies: Serbia and Montenegro. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 75(8), 1311–1335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2115013>

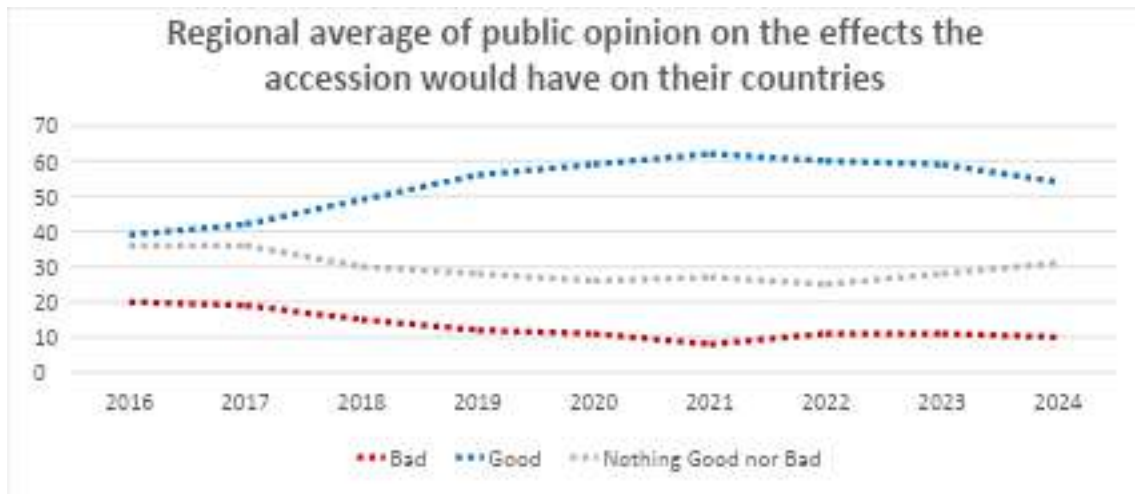


Figure 5

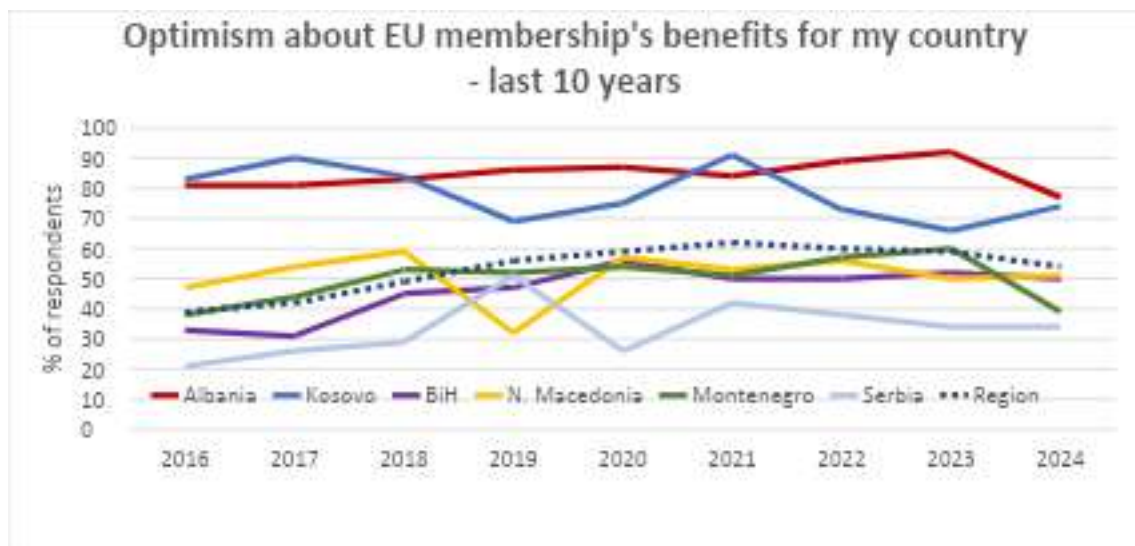


Figure 6

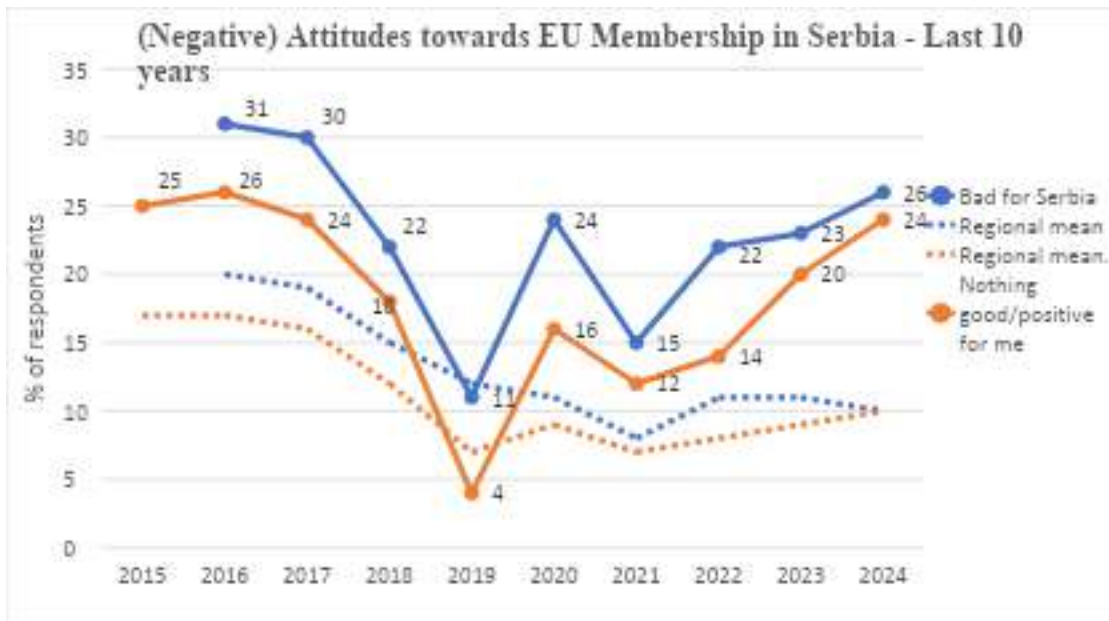


Figure 7

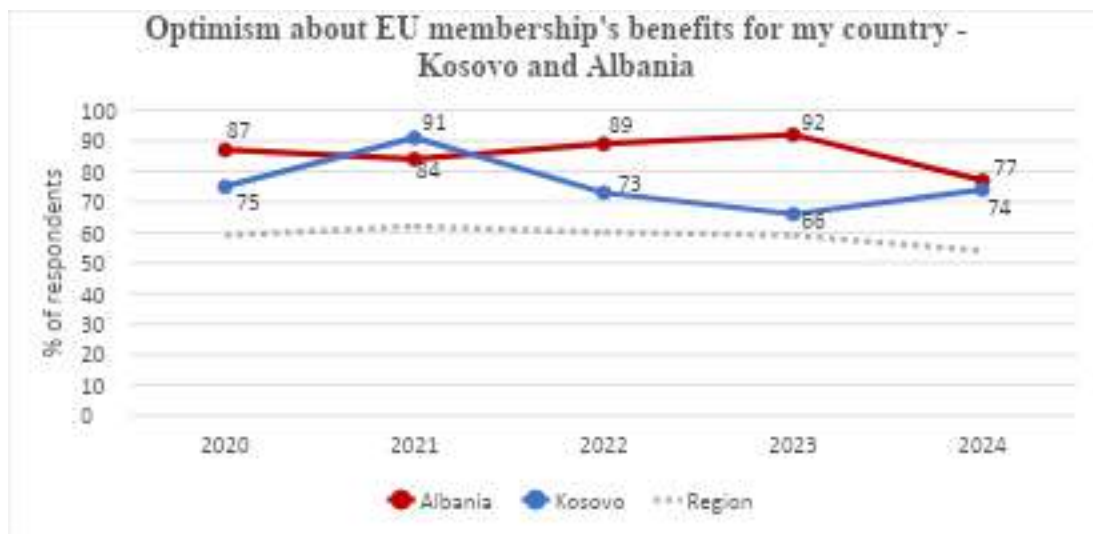


Figure 8

## 4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

In her trip to the Western Balkans in October 2024, European Commission President [Ursula von der Leyen affirmed](#) that “enlargement will be at the top of the political agenda for the next five years”.

Still, notwithstanding the political and financial efforts – among which, three round of Instruments for Pre Accession ([IPA](#)), resulting in about €34 billion for the 2007-2027 period, the economic support to address Covid-19 crisis in 2020 ([€3.3 billion](#)), and a dedicated instrument called [Growth Plan for the Western Balkans](#), resulting in new €6 billion for the period 2024-2027, WB6 public opinion no longer widely perceives the EU as a reliable and valuable partner, above all in Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.

So, what should the EU do to regain the trust and esteem of the public opinion from the WB6 region? It should act visibly and concretely, and, above all, consistently with its own values. It must return to be perceived as a moral authority, as it was once admired, both with regard to the WB6 region and in the international arena.

First, the EU should improve its communication capacities in the WB6, in order to raise the awareness of the citizens of the six countries about what the EU has been doing in the region for decades, highlighting the concrete measures already taken (such as the inclusion in the Erasmus + and the visa-free policy) and those that will be taken (access to SEPA circuit [for Montenegro and Albania is due in April 2025](#)).

Secondly, the EU must deliver timely and efficiently in the implementation of the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans once the conditions have been fulfilled. This would be a tangible sign to WB6 citizens that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union”, which could help give a new boost to the EU’s good reputation.

Furthermore, the EU should commit to concretely address the region’s most challenging issues, which are several, and include advancing the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and taking more effective action on the inefficiencies and sectarian divisions within the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (particularly by pushing for compliance with the 2009 ECHR ruling and by carefully monitoring the ongoing events in Republika Srpska). Additionally, the EU should work to ease tensions between Bulgaria and North Macedonia and to decouple their dispute from the latter’s



accession path<sup>13</sup>. It should counter Russian propaganda in Serbia and Montenegro, and, more broadly, it should take a firm stance against democratic backsliding and widespread corruption across the region. The EU should also support all countries in addressing the pressing issue of brain drain.

The accession of Montenegro - if the merit-based approach is respected - within the next few years would send a message of hope to other countries, many of which are increasingly skeptical about the prospect of membership - particularly Serbia and North Macedonia.

On the other hand, the EU should avoid agreements that have undesired consequences on the fundamental rights of civil society of the candidate countries (such as the lithium deal with Serbia) or supporting controversial and ineffective initiatives like the [Italy-Albania agreement on migrants](#), which harm its reputation in the region's public opinion.

In sum, the EU must strive to be seen as the most desirable ally that citizens can look to with hope. It should leverage its soft power (culture, lifestyle, sports, education, etc.) alongside its economic appeal, especially in contrast to other influential but authoritarian actors such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries, which are actively seeking to fill the gap created by the EU enlargement / accession fatigue. While the EU still has a lot to do to regain trust from WB6 public opinion, so do the governments of the WB6 to raise awareness about the benefits of EU membership.

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<sup>13</sup> Fouéré, E. (2023). EU enlargement and the resolution of bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans, CEPS, <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/eu-enlargement-and-the-resolution-of-bilateral-disputes-in-the-western-balkans/>

## ABOUT REUNIR

REUNIR, a Horizon-funded project with 12 partners from across Europe, examines how the EU can strengthen its foreign and security toolboxes to bolster the resilience and transformation of (potential) candidate countries in a new age of international relations. REUNIR’s foresight approach takes the fundamental uncertainty and openness of alternative futures seriously. Adding the effects of ‘protean power’ unleashed in unforeseen circumstances to a multi-disciplinary approach to the research of the EU’s ‘control power’ in relations with strategic rivals, REUNIR empirically assesses foreign threats to the military, socio-economic and democratic resilience of nine neighbouring countries, determines capability shortfalls, maps local perceptions of the EU’s support and political perspectives inside the EU on neighbourhood relations. Outlining scenarios up to 2035, REUNIR offers evidence-based policy recommendations to mitigate malign foreign interference and contribute to strengthening the EU’s external action.



