

EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans in 2025 – different speeds of integration

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The year 2025 was a vibrant one for the EU enlargement process to the Western Balkans. Unlike previous years, in which the enlargement process was characterised by slow progress, developments in 2025 confirmed the emergence of clearly differentiated accession trajectories among candidate countries, a trend already noted in previous OSORIN analysis¹, with Montenegro remaining the frontrunner to join the EU in the near future and Albania making substantial steps to follow suit in the following years. By contrast, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo* made no substantive progress toward accession. With regular annual assessments of the progress of candidates, the European Commission's *2025 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*² provides a useful overview of the process. This edition clearly acknowledges both renewed enlargement momentum and growing asymmetry among the candidates, which will be studied in more detail in this analysis.

Among all Western Balkan candidates, Montenegro stands out in 2025 as the only country for which EU accession can credibly be described as within reach. The Commission's assessment is unambiguous: Montenegro remains the most advanced candidate, having opened all negotiating chapters and provisionally closed several, including additional chapters during the reporting period, after meeting the relevant closing benchmarks³. External analyses emphasise that Montenegro's progress has become a test case for the EU's merit-based enlargement logic⁴. Most importantly, the Commission acknowledges Montenegro's stated objective of concluding accession negotiations by the end of 2026 and explicitly notes that, provided the current pace of reforms is maintained, the country is on track to meet this ambitious goal⁵. Such an assessment represents one of the strongest endorsements of a concrete accession timeline offered to a Western Balkan candidate in more than a decade and reaffirms the policy shift and a firmer dedication

¹ Ma. Milenković, *EU enlargement to the Western Balkans in 2024 – Glimmers of hope for the region's integration*, in *OSORIN*, 20 March 2024, https://www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/files/177_item_2.pdf?v=1734515485.

² European Commission, *2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy*, COM(2025) 690 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0690&utm_source.

³ Ivi, 27-28.

⁴ European Policy Centre (EPC), *Montenegro's EU Accession: A Confidence-Building Tutorial for the Union*, 2025, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/montenegros-eu-accession-a-confidence-building-tutorial-for-the-union/>.

⁵ European Commission, *2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy*, 28.

to the enlargement process following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022⁶.

The progress in Montenegro during 2025 went beyond technical alignment with the *acquis*. The Commission highlights the challenges the country faced in the 2024-2025 period regarding the appointment of judges, while underscoring that the country “should focus on delivering on the rule of law chapters and further advance on the critical areas of freedom of expression and media freedom”⁷. It also underlines that the “immediate focus needs to be on delivering key pending EU-related reforms and meeting the closing benchmarks, based on the structured and well-planned approach to advance the EU integration agenda. Continued broad political consensus on key reforms remains crucial”⁸. Taken together, the developments in 2025 confirm that Montenegro has moved beyond the status of symbolic frontrunner and exemplarily illustrate how accession negotiations in the Balkans now function as a genuine preparatory phase for membership, demonstrating that enlargement policy can still deliver transformative outcomes when political commitment exists on both sides of the EU and the candidate country.

Albania emerged in 2025 as the second-most advanced country in the Western Balkans within the enlargement process. After years of delay, largely attributable to external and bilateral factors, Albania transformed the formal opening of negotiations into a period of sustained, accelerated progress toward EU membership. The Commission characterises this phase as one of “unprecedented momentum”⁹, underpinned by an unusually rapid opening of negotiating clusters, which at the end of the year stood at five out of six, with the last expected to open during 2026. This rapid progression marks a decisive departure from earlier patterns of procedural inertia and signals a qualitative shift in Albania's accession trajectory. Recent think-tank analyses underline that Albania's progress reflects not only improved relations with EU institutions, but also a strategic domestic dedication to reform priorities¹⁰. The Commission attributes this progress to Albania's continued commitment to reforms in core accession areas. Particular emphasis is placed on the comprehensive justice reform, including the completion of vetting procedures at first instance, as well as tangible results achieved by specialised anti-corruption and organised crime bodies¹¹. As with Montenegro, the Commission acknowledges Albania's objective of concluding accession negotiations by the end of 2027, and considers this timeline achievable, provided that the reform momentum is sustained. At the same time, the Communication identifies areas requiring continued attention, notably media freedom, high-level

⁶ Ma. Milenković, *Ukraine war: A push towards differentiated integration for the Western Balkans?*, in J. Džankić, S. Kacarska, S. Keil (eds.), *A Year Later: War in Ukraine and Western Balkan (Geo)Politics*, Florence, European University Institute, 2023, 155-164.

⁷ European Commission. *2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy*, 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ivi, 3.

¹⁰ For the broader analysis of the Albania's current momentum see: W. Zweers, D. Bechev, I. Gjoni, S. Maillard, M. Nič, N. Xaviereff, *Albania's EU accession sprint: Balancing momentum, reform, and EU scrutiny*, Policy Brief, Clingendael Institute, 3 December 2025, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/albanias-eu-accession-sprint-balancing-momentum-reform-and-eu-scrutiny>.

¹¹ European Commission, *2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy*, 3.

corruption, and the effective implementation of adopted reforms¹².

In contrast to the Western Balkan accession frontrunners, Serbia's accession process in 2025 was characterised by stagnation, accompanied by increasingly serious concerns from EU institutions regarding democratic standards and the rule of law¹³. While Serbian authorities continued to declare EU membership a strategic objective, the Commission underlines that "Serbia needs to deliver on credible reforms across the board, most importantly in the area of the fundamentals of the accession process as well as in accelerating *acquis* alignment, including progressive and stronger alignment with the CFSP"¹⁴. Serbia has not opened any new negotiation clusters since December 2021, and while the Commission still insists that the country is ready to move forward and open the next cluster of negotiations, it underscores that "while acknowledging a recent increase in alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy, Serbia should step up its efforts towards a more stable and higher alignment. Serbia should clearly manifest its geopolitical orientation towards the EU..."¹⁵. Notably, the 2025 Communication goes beyond purely technical assessment by referring to domestic political developments, including heightened polarisation in society, mass protests since late 2024, and concerns related to the treatment of demonstrators and pressure on civil society¹⁶. Taken together, these elements support the conclusion that Serbia's 2025 accession process was marked by stagnation in areas central to EU membership.

For North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo*, 2025 brought no substantive progress toward accession. Despite differences in their formal status, all three remained stalled due to unresolved political and institutional obstacles. In North Macedonia, the accession process continues to be blocked by the failure to adopt constitutionally required changes, namely as underlined by the Commission: "with a view to including in the Constitution citizens who live within the borders of the state and who are part of other people, such as Bulgarians, referred to in the Council Conclusions of July 2022, which the country committed to launch and achieve linked to earlier Council conclusions"¹⁷. The country has been facing obstacles stemming from bilateral conditionality that have obstructed its EU accession for an extended period¹⁸. The report further underlines that "North Macedonia should intensify efforts to deliver on EU-related reforms, in particular under the fundamentals cluster, notably to uphold the rule of law, in particular, by safeguarding judicial independence and integrity, and strengthening the fight against corruption and organised crime"¹⁹. This reaffirms the centrality of the *fundamentals* in

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See notably: European Parliament, *European Parliament resolution on polarisation and increased repression in Serbia, one year after the Novi Sad tragedy*, P10_TA(2025)0248, 22 October 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0248_EN.html.

¹⁴ European Commission, *2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ivi*, 31.

¹⁸ On bilateral conditionality in the EU integration process see further: Mi. Milenković, *Using ethnology-based intangible heritage safeguarding as an alternative to culturalized EU conditionality in the Western Balkans*, in L. Montanari, A.-O. Cozzi, Ma. Milenković, I. Ristić (a cura di), *We, the people of the United Europe – Reflections on the European state of mind*, Naples, Editoriale Scientifica, 2023, 225-234.

¹⁹ European Commission. *2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy*, 31.

the EU accession process, which dominate the negotiations from the opening to the closure, in line with the methodology adopted back in 2020²⁰.

Bosnia and Herzegovina remained affected by political fragmentation and institutional paralysis. The Commission reports continued stalemate in reform implementation, combined with internal political tensions and challenges to the constitutional order. Some legislative steps taken during the year (namely the adoption of the Law on Courts and the Law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council) were insufficient to enable the opening of accession negotiations, even though the formal Council decision to start the process was made back in 2024. As underlined by the Commission, the country “needs to develop a national plan for the adoption of the *acquis* and urgently appoint the national IPA coordinator. Progress on these issues, as well as the nomination of a chief negotiator, is key for the Commission to present the negotiating framework to the Council and to start the explanatory part of the screening of the EU *acquis*”²¹.

Kosovo*, while benefiting from different integration-related measures, is currently not on the accession negotiations track due to its specific status. The Commission reiterates that normalisation of relations with Serbia remains a decisive prerequisite for both sides, affirming that: “both Kosovo and Serbia are expected to implement all of their respective obligations stemming from the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation and its Implementation Annex, as well as all past Dialogue agreements”²².

Finally, 2025 was marked by the implementation of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans²³, an important policy development in 2024 that brought the Union’s new mid-term strategy for the region. A key component of this plan is the 6 billion EUR Reform and Growth Facility, comprising 1.5 billion EUR in extra funding for the candidates on top of the existing pre-accession aid schemes, and up to 4.5 billion EUR in favorable loans. The Growth Plan is designed to complement the Economic and Investment Plan for the region²⁴, supporting economic convergence with the EU and accelerating reforms that are crucial to the fundamentals of the accession process. As envisaged, it aims to gradually integrate the region into specific areas of the EU single market, contingent on progress in regional economic integration, alignment with relevant EU *acquis*, and the establishment of adequate administrative capacities and procedures²⁵. This new strategy for the region was clearly devised in the absence of immediate membership options. An important aspect of this evolving approach is preparing candidate countries for potential participation in the EU internal market, even without full EU membership²⁶. In late 2024,

²⁰ See further: Ma. Milenković, *EU Enlargement Strategy 2020 – Paving the way for differentiated integration?*, in OSORIN, 2021, https://www.osorin.it/uploads/model_4/files/54_item_2.pdf?v=1608022440.

²¹ European Commission. *2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy*, 32.

²² Ivi, 5.

²³ Regulation (EU) 2024/1449 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans.

²⁴ See further: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1811.

²⁵ European Commission, *2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, COM(2021) 644 final, 2.

²⁶ More on differentiated integration options for the Western Balkans region see: Ma. Milenković, *The Western Balkans and European Union enlargement – exploring possibilities of differentiated*

the EU-required Reform agendas were adopted by the candidates (except Bosnia and Herzegovina, which completed them only in 2025 due to a political stalemate). In 2025, the first funds were released to the countries of the region, but at varying speeds, corresponding to the pace of reform implementation in each of them²⁷. As underlined by the Commission: “Accelerated, or gradual, integration seeks to bring some of the benefits of future EU accession into the pre-accession stage by allowing a candidate country to integrate into specific areas of EU policy, notably parts of the EU Single Market, once legislative alignment and the capacity to implement the EU *acquis* is in place. This provides an incentive for early alignment and implementation of the EU *acquis*”²⁸. However, the Commission firmly stresses that gradual integration is not a substitute for enlargement but rather a tool to support it²⁹.

Overall, 2025 confirmed that the EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans is no longer characterised by a shared regional trajectory. Montenegro and Albania demonstrated that accession remains achievable under conditions of sustained reform and institutional engagement, with Montenegro in particular approaching the final stages of the process. At the same time, stagnation of all other candidates exposed the limits of enlargement in the absence of genuine political commitment.

Febbraio 2026

integration, in D. Fromage (ed.), *Re-defining Membership: Differentiation in and outside the European Union*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, 273-290.

²⁷ See further: European Commission. *2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy*, 18.

²⁸ *Ivi*, 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*