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THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA (NCEU-MK)

LET JUSTICE RULE THE WESTERN BALKANS: EUROPEAN INTEGRATION BETWEEN STEPS BACKWARD AND STEPS FORWARD



PUBLIC POLICY DOCUMENT



Европско движење Северна Македонија
European Movement North Macedonia



NATIONAL CONVENTION ON THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE REPUBLIC OF
NORTH MACEDONIA (NCEU-MK)

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**Let Justice Rule the Western Balkans:
European integration between steps backward
and steps forward**

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LET JUSTICE RULE THE WESTERN BALKANS: EUROPEAN INTEGRATION BETWEEN STEPS BACKWARD AND STEPS FORWARD

INTRODUCTION

This analytical policy brief is based on the activities and results of the work of the National Convention on the European Union in the Republic of North Macedonia (NCEU-MK) to date², as well as on the experiences and discussions held within the National Convention on the European Union in Serbia³ and the National Convention on the European Union in Albania⁴. The purpose of this document is to systematize and analytically address the key issues that have emerged from the structured dialogue between institutions, civil society, academia, judges, prosecutors, and the broader expert community. Particular focus is placed on the issues that were raised and discussed at the Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK, as well as at the plenary conference and the expert meeting organized within the framework of the project “Let Justice Rule the Region.”⁵

This document analyzes the state of the rule of law in the Western Balkan countries, its pivotal role in the European Union enlargement process, and the importance of regional cooperation not only as a condition for integration but also as a factor in ensuring continuity in the reform processes. Particular emphasis is placed on the principles of good governance, integrity and impartiality, transparency and accountability, as well as the prevention of and fight against corruption, which are considered important structural elements of the rule of law mechanisms.

The analysis is based on thematically focused debates among professionals, i.e., relevant stakeholders from the broad field of the rule of law, which enabled the comparison of different perspectives and experiences on certain vital

¹ Prof. Dr. Mileva Gjurovska, President of the European Movement in the Republic of North Macedonia and Professor at the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, Faculty of Philosophy.

² [The National Convention on the European Union in the Republic of North Macedonia](#) is implemented by the [European Movement of the Republic of North Macedonia \(EMMK\)](#), supported by the European Union within the framework of the IPA Civil Society Facility 2020 and SlovakAid.

³ [The National Convention on the European Union in Serbia.](#)

⁴ [The National Convention of Albania](#) is implemented by the European Movement of Albania (EMA).

⁵ This project is supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands for the period of 2022–2025.

issues. The conclusions and recommendations derived from the dialogue are further supported by comparative analyses and relevant data, with the aim of more effectively defining the social context through a broader comparative perspective.

The structured dialogue methodology made it possible to move beyond political and party perspectives, allowing arguments to be considered in their expert, institutional, and societal dimensions, in accordance with the principle of political impartiality and a focus on the public interest.⁶

This document confirms the National Convention on the European Union as a relevant platform for structured dialogue and monitoring of key issues in the European integration process, which produces well-founded recommendations and support for reform processes.

The National Convention on the European Union is a dialogue methodology that was employed by the Slovak Republic during its accession to the Union. Over the course of an entire decade, this model of structured dialogue involving various stakeholders has also been implemented in the Western Balkan countries. First in Montenegro, then in Serbia, and since 2017 in the Republic of North Macedonia, and later in Albania. The NCEU received initial support (both financial and in terms of human resources) from Slovakia but was later recognized and supported by the EU and other donors.⁷

The fact that, in the Macedonian context, over 3,000 stakeholders participated in NCEU-MK, including senior representatives of institutions and European partners, indicates that the Convention has established a broad societal foundation, gaining legitimacy not only from the institutions and other stakeholders directly involved in the process, but also from the general public. A similar dynamic can be observed in Serbia, where the National Convention involves hundreds of civil society organizations, as well as in Albania, where structured panel discussions are actively organized in cooperation with the

⁶ The dialogue took place in the form of a plenary conference with four panel discussions, entitled [“Reforms Beyond Rhetoric: Regional Challenges on the Path to the European Union”](#). The conference was held on 26 November 2025 at the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, involving 34 speakers from the Western Balkans, the Central European Initiative countries, and the European Union. There were 164 people in attendance overall.

⁷ “On its journey to join the European Union, your nation is at a critical turning point. Usually, these phases are difficult. They demand tolerance, candid communication, and the guts to make choices that genuinely benefit every citizen... On numerous occasions, you have demonstrated resilience and the ability to seek common solutions, even in challenging times, and that is precisely why the National Convention is of particular value—it creates a space for inclusive and expert discussion on reforms crucial for European integration,” noted Iveta Hrycová, Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the Republic of North Macedonia, during her address at [the Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK and the Fourth Plenary Conference of “Let's Justice Rule the Region”](#) on 26 November 2025.

relevant ministries. These practices further confirm the regional value of this dialogue model.

Considering that, during 2022, Serbia's accession negotiations were already at a more advanced stage, the National Convention of Serbia initiated project activities in the form of a structured dialogue with a regional focus, with the aim of facilitating the transition to the revised accession methodology, in which the rule of law is established as a "foundation." This initiative, titled "Let Justice Rule the Region," was supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands as a three-year project, which was implemented simultaneously in all three countries. In essence, throughout the transition period, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, through various programs and activities, provided ongoing support for institutional strengthening and capacity building, with the aim of implementing the principles of the rule of law in the candidate countries for European Union membership.⁸

In all three countries, the National Convention on the European Union goes beyond the scope of a time-limited project. It serves as a long-term platform for structured dialogue, consistently maintaining a focus on reform processes even during periods of prolonged election cycles, political turbulence, and limited resources. "The National Convention has developed into one of the most well-organized pro-European platforms in Serbia, as well as in the region. Its role is to help maintain the momentum of reform, to prevent the normalization of stagnation, and to serve as a reminder that the criteria related to the rule of law remain essential and unavoidable in the accession process."⁹

Considering the current phase of the European integration process and the changed geopolitical environment, in which the European Union is once again prioritizing enlargement as a strategic instrument, the document focuses on key dilemmas: Does the new political impetus for enlargement represent a real opportunity for fundamental transformation? What lies beyond the declared political will and the rhetoric of reform? How can the danger of window dressing for reform be prevented? Furthermore, the document also addresses the issue of the new dynamics of EU enlargement, which are closely linked to the current geopolitical context, i.e., whether they strengthen

⁸ "A key component of the accession process is the rule of law. Membership of the European Union is predicated on a rule-based society with an independent judiciary and the idea that no one is above the law." Özlem Canel, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the Republic of North Macedonia – from her presentation at the [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

⁹ Bojana Selaković, National Coordinator, National Convention, Serbia, [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

the substance of the process or create new forms of conditionality without sufficient clarity regarding the process itself.¹⁰

From this perspective, this text can be read as an analytical “statement” on the socio-political situation in the Western Balkans at a time when enlargement is gaining significant political momentum. The analysis of Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia provides a comparative perspective and serves as a sound foundation for formulating conclusions and public policy guidelines.

This document seeks to move beyond the prevailing view that the rule of law is merely a formal prerequisite or a technical cluster within the negotiating framework; rather, it is an essential and transformative component in the modernization of societies aiming to align with other developed societies in the EU. It is also important to consider the fact that the rule of law is not only an internal obligation for candidate countries but also a binding principle for all EU Member States. “Although the accession process entails the fulfillment of multiple conditions, among which the rule of law holds a central place, it is important to bear in mind that even some Member States face challenges regarding this fundamental principle, which constitutes the core of the normative foundation of the European project. Several Member States reject or downplay the European Parliament’s monitoring missions. This political resistance to the monitoring and evaluation of the rule of law is particularly concerning.”¹¹

The analysis illustrates the complex and uneven nature of reform processes by comparing the experiences of candidate countries at different stages of the EU accession process, with a focus on Serbia, Albania, and the Republic of North Macedonia. The comparison indicates that progress in reforms is neither uniform nor linear, but rather depends on the degree of institutional stability, the continuity of political support, as well as the clarity and relevance of the reform measures and their alignment with the available resources—material, administrative, human, and others.

¹⁰ “Enlargement and the Union’s internal reforms, on the one hand, and deeper integration, on the other, should not be viewed as mutually exclusive or superficially. Conversely, the two processes ought to run concurrently and complement one another. Given that territorial expansion has frequently outpaced internal integration in prior waves of enlargement, a larger Europe must also be more democratic and integrated. Therefore, rather than waiting until full membership, EU reforms should be linked to a model of gradual integration in which candidate countries would be incorporated into particular Union policies and structures as negotiating chapters are closed... Such an approach would make enlargement more concrete, more realistic, and more credible.” – Pier Virgilio Dastoli, President of the European Movement – Italy, [Expert Meeting, “Let Justice Govern the Region”](#)—27 November 2025, Skopje.

¹¹ Ibid.

At the same time, it should not be implied that reforms are lagging behind. On the contrary, significant efforts and resources have been invested, and in several areas, positive trends are evident that deserve greater visibility and appropriate public articulation. However, in the Republic of North Macedonia and in Serbia, there is a lack of a more clearly articulated positive public discourse regarding the European Union and the reform process. An atmosphere of general dissatisfaction and resignation prevails. In contrast, Albania stands out as an example of heightened public enthusiasm and strong mobilization of support for reforms, demonstrating that constructive and initiative-taking discourse can contribute to a favorable social climate and stronger institutional consolidation.

Therefore, a comparative perspective enables not only a critical examination of the structural constraints that hinder progress, but also the identification of applicable practices and positive experiences that can contribute to sustainability in the reform process.

The regional project “Let Justice Rule the Region” is among the first civic initiatives to evolve into a mature and sustainable form of regional cooperation. Over time, partnerships among organizations from the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania have evolved from initial professional contacts into strategic and trusting relationships, laying the foundation for deeper and more substantive joint initiatives.¹²

¹² “The National Convention on the European Union, as a civic platform for dialogue among all stakeholders in the European integration process, has also acquired a regional dimension through the project ‘Let Justice Govern the Region’, supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This is the last year of the project. With 164 participants in the auditorium, the project’s fourth regional plenary conference—also known as the Eighth Plenary Conference of the National Convention on the European Union in the Republic of North Macedonia—confirms that the various stakeholders have accepted and legitimized the structured dialogue. The three countries’ National Conventions have worked together to create a structured regional dialogue that is beginning to take on a functional form, requiring further development and deepening. This cooperation has proven to be a functional platform for exchange, mutual learning, and trust-building among the countries of the region.”—Mileva Gjurovska, statement at the [Eighth Plenary Conference of the National Convention on the European Union in the Republic of North Macedonia](#), as part of the project “Let Justice Rule the Region”, held at the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, Skopje, 26 November 2025.



THE WESTERN BALKANS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

For the Western Balkan countries, the European integration process gained new momentum in 2022 with the revised methodology for accession negotiations with the European Union. Drawing on the experiences of previous enlargement cycles, particularly following the accession of Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, the European Union undertook to reshape the negotiating framework by grouping the negotiation chapters into broader thematic units known as clusters. The new negotiating framework, structured into six clusters, is based on the “fundamentals first” principle, which establishes the rule of law as the foundation of the entire accession process. Embedded in the founding treaties of the European Union, the principles of the rule of law form the foundation of its institutional and legal architecture. Precisely for this reason, meeting these standards is also a key condition in the accession process.

Essentially, without the rule of law, it is also not possible to strengthen the institutions that are supposed to implement the reforms. Therefore, the lack of progress in the fundamental areas also limits progress in other chapters, making the negotiation process “reversible” until the standards set out in the “fundamentals” are fully met.¹³

Following the institutionalization of the new accession methodology, in 2023/2024, the European Union took an additional strategic step through the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans¹⁴, which introduced a specific framework for directly linking European integration to progress in reforms, for the encouragement of which direct financial and economic support was also provided. The plan was presented as a support package of approximately €6 billion (grants and loans), contingent on the fulfillment of specific reform steps. Conceptually, the Growth Plan represents a shift from “waiting for membership” to gradual integration even before membership. Historically, this is the first time the EU has introduced a model similar to the Recovery and Resilience Facility, but now applied to candidate countries.

The principle of conditionality, further reinforced through the EU Rule of Law Mechanism, is also incorporated into the negotiation methodology and specifically operationalized in the Growth Plan. The “reforms-for-funds” model links financial support to the achievement of annually set objectives, based on clear timeframes and measurable indicators defined in the Reform Agendas. Their implementation is a prerequisite for the disbursement of funds,

¹³ European Commission (2020). [Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans](#)

¹⁴ European Commission, “[Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.](#)” Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, November 8, 2023.

and any deviation or delay may result in the suspension of financial support. The reform agendas bring together priorities from different clusters, but the reform objectives from the “Fundamentals” cluster hold a special place, as they integrate the areas of rule of law, anti-corruption, public finances, digitalization, and improvement of the business climate into a single matrix of commitments.

The Growth Plan also introduces the gradual economic integration of the countries of the region into the Single European Market, through a phased approach to the four freedoms (movement of goods, services, capital, and people) by strengthening the Common Regional Market. Thus, reform processes are no longer treated as an abstract prerequisite for future membership, but as a direct instrument for ongoing economic development, competitiveness, and regional convergence with the EU. Thus, the evolution from the new methodology to the Growth Plan represents a shift from a traditional approach based on alignment with the European *acquis* to an integrated model that combines policy conditionality, financial incentives, and gradual integration through regional integration. In this model, the Reform Agendas serve as a central link between European priorities and national policies, ensuring clearer accountability, greater predictability, and a stronger connection between reforms and tangible benefits for citizens.

The term “Western Balkans” is a geopolitical construct that encompasses the countries of Southeast Europe that are not yet EU members, as part of the EU’s enlargement strategies for this part of Europe. The term is not politically neutral and also carries a sense of temporariness, as a region that constantly oscillates between fragmentation and integration, between the past and the present. The prolonged transition, marked by conflicts and divisions, continues to create conditions for the coexistence of processes of division and processes of integration, which shape the “ethos” of the Balkan countries. In political narratives, the past persists, along with the present and future challenges associated with EU membership.¹⁵

Although data from regional surveys indicate a decrease in the proportion of citizens who cite historical mistrust as an obstacle to cooperation among Western Balkan countries (from 47% in 2024 to 37% in 2025), as well as a decline in the perception of the role of nationalist policies, this narrative still persists in public discourse. Historical issues and prejudices continue to be a factor that slows down the process of regional integration.¹⁶

¹⁵ When it comes to the Western Balkans, the relationship between two different processes—integration and disintegration—deserves substantial analytical attention. Marco Zoppi, [Futures of the Western Balkans: Fragmentation and Integration in the Region and Beyond](#), Springer Briefs in Political Science, Springer Nature, 2023, p. 11.

¹⁶ Regional Cooperation Council, [Balkan Barometer 2025: Public Opinion](#).

Both the EU institutions and the EU Member States have significantly contributed to the unpredictability of the European integration process. Towards the end of 2019, there was a turning point in the enlargement process. France, Denmark, and the Netherlands blocked the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.¹⁷ This approach clearly demonstrated a departure from the standard criteria established by the EU Council in Copenhagen in 1993. According to the explanations provided at the time, the new approach was due, among other things, to the Union’s reduced capacity to integrate other countries, as the Union itself needed reform.¹⁸ The decline in the momentum of integration during this period sparked significant pessimism among citizens in the Western Balkans, as shown by the data in the table below.

Table 1: Public support for EU membership in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia

Year	Average support for EU membership	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia
2020	59%	87%	57%	26%
2021	62%	84%	51%	42%
2025	64%	86%	62%	42%

Source: [Balkan Barometer 2025 Public Opinion](#)

The increased support for EU accession in 2025 is also confirmed by the Special Eurobarometer, which indicates the existence of a pronounced “momentum” for integration, with particularly high levels of support in Albania (91%) and the Republic of North Macedonia (69%).¹⁹

As the events following the outbreak of the military crisis in Ukraine have clearly demonstrated, the success of the negotiation process does not depend solely on the internal reforms and institutional capacity of the candi-

¹⁷ In March 2020, the main institutions of the European Union gave the green light to open accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania. [Council of the EU, 2020](#)). But in November of the same year, the Bulgarian government exercised another veto, this time only against North Macedonia. Official Sofia demanded that the language spoken in the neighboring country be acknowledged as a Bulgarian dialect rather than “Macedonian.” With the re-imposition of historical and identity-related issues by an EU Member State, the past and divisions once again became the main topic of public discourse and provided fertile ground for a new national challenge—this time as part of the very process of European integration.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ European Commission, [Special Eurobarometer](#), September 2025.

date countries. On the contrary, the pace of enlargement is also significantly influenced by broader geopolitical processes, which are redefining the European Union's strategic agenda. In this context, enlargement priorities are increasingly shaped by security and geostrategic interests, with the focus of interest shifting to regions of growing importance for the stability and positioning of the European continent. This indicates that the accession process is becoming increasingly contingent on external factors, rather than solely on measurable reform outcomes. In an environment where candidate countries have limited influence on global geostrategic developments, the most sustainable strategy remains a strong commitment to domestic reforms.²⁰

It should be noted that not only the European Commission participates in the accession process as a technical negotiator, but EU Member States also play a key role through the Council of the EU, where unanimous decisions are made regarding the opening and closing of chapters, the adoption of negotiating positions, and the overall progress of candidate countries. In addition, the European Parliament exercises political oversight and gives its consent at the final stage of accession. This means that enlargement is both a technical and a political process, in which national interests, domestic political dynamic, and the geostrategic priorities of individual Member States can directly influence the pace and outcome of the negotiations.²¹

For candidate countries, it is particularly important to understand how to communicate with the European Union. Sharing Slovakia's experiences, Tomáš Stražaj pointed out that, even after joining the EU, issues related to Euroscepticism do not disappear. The example of Slovakia shows that, despite its membership since 2004, doubts still persist. Although support for the EU stands at around 75%, 66% of citizens still believe that "Brussels dictates policies." This represents a cognitive dissonance, especially considering that trust in national institutions is around 32–33%, while trust in EU institutions is around 50%. This distorted discourse stems in part from the way communication is conducted: there is often a lack of substantive public debate on European policies, enlargement, or the EU budget, while politicians frequent-

²⁰ Michael Emerson & Steven Blockmans, [The 2023 Enlargement Package – Major Political Proposals and Glimmers of a Staged Accession Approach](#), Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS), Guest Report No. 19, 2023, (2023).

²¹ "Enlargement has always had a political component per se, influenced not only by the formal fulfillment of predetermined criteria but also by Member States' consensus and strategic interests. Despite not meeting all the requirements for accession, certain Member States were admitted due to political decisions. Given this, the next stage of enlargement will unavoidably be even more clearly political, particularly if the EU wants to continue to be relevant and powerful in the cutthroat international system. The political nature of enlargement is further highlighted by the varying length of negotiations, which can range from decades-long processes in some cases - to accelerated progress in others." Aleksandar Krzhalovski, Director of MCIC, [Expert Meeting: "Let Justice Rule the Region."](#) 27 November 2025.

ly use the Union as a tool in domestic political discourse. Another problem is unrealistic expectations: EU accession is often portrayed as a “gate to Heaven,” even though economic and social challenges do not automatically disappear. The EU is neither an ATM with unlimited funds nor solely a community of values, but rather a combination of both.²²

POLITICAL WILL AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION AS DETERMINANTS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

According to existing analyses, reforms in the region are often selective, tactical, and instrumentalized. They are implemented more in response to external pressure than as a result of internally recognized and genuine societal needs. The political context is characterized by pronounced polarization, which creates an environment in which the assumption of genuine responsibility for reform processes is relativized or postponed.²³ Political polarization further contributes to the transformation of public discourse into a permanent election campaign. Under such conditions, long-term and structural reforms are sidelined in favor of short-term political gains.²⁴

In reality, the culture of political polarization manifests itself in such a way that, if the opposition accuses the government of stalling reforms or of some form of corrupt activity, the government responds with the question, “What did you do?,” shifting responsibility onto previous governing structures. This pattern of mutual accusation reduces the substantive debate on reform policies to party narratives and leaves no room for genuine public accountability. Simply put, public debate on these issues is prevented.²⁵

The experiences of countries that have gone through the negotiation process, particularly those of the Republic of Croatia, show that progress in the negotiation process is faster and less painful when there is a strong political consensus regarding the European perspective. The European agenda sho-

²² Tomaš Stražaj, [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

²³ Claudia Laštro & Florian Bieber, [Democratic patterns and party systems in the Western Balkans](#), Springer Nature, 2023, Volume 1, pp. 59–75, (2023).

²⁴ “Serbian society exhibits a perilous and growing polarization. The split into two diametrically opposed sides is evident in the events in Belgrade. Scenes from those events demonstrate both a profound social disintegration and an increase in Euroscepticism, particularly among youth. The EU integration process is not being seriously discussed in Serbia today. ‘Destabilocracy,’ governance through destabilization rather than democracy, has now led to destabilization both within the country and beyond its borders.” – Duško Lopandić, Vice President of the European Movement in Serbia, [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

²⁵ This form of party rhetoric, based on shifting responsibility and relativizing current failures by pointing to the past actions of the “other side”, is known in political science as “whataboutism” and represents a strategy for avoiding substantive political accountability.

uld serve as a unifying national project, not as a tool for party competition. According to Kristijan Turkalj, the negotiations will be conducted successfully if a political consensus is reached on the vital political issues that need to be addressed through the joint efforts of all stakeholders.²⁶ Furthermore, “pretending” to implement reforms is not helpful.

Data from regional surveys indicate that, despite relatively stable public support for EU membership, trust in national institutions remains low, which reinforces the perception that European integration is an externally imposed process rather than an internally driven transformation.²⁷ Public opinion remains critical of key domestic political institutions. Political parties receive the highest level of distrust, with 77% of respondents expressing little or no trust, followed by parliaments (70%).

In the Western Balkan countries, European integration undoubtedly remains a strategic goal.²⁸ Despite the often-declaratory approach and the lack of consistent political will to implement substantial and far-reaching reforms, citizens’ perceptions indicate that the European perspective continues to be seen as a legitimate and desirable path for the future of their countries.

One country where there is a relatively broad political consensus on its European future is Albania, where public support for the EU has traditionally been among the highest in the region. Since 2024, the country has been on a fast track towards EU membership—by 17 November 2025, all 33 negotiating chapters had been opened. The opening of 6 clusters took place in just over a year.²⁹ The European Commission has described Albania’s accession negotiations as having “reached a level of unprecedented momentum”, and the government has publicly expressed its ambition to complete the process by 2030, a goal for which it has received tacit encouragement from the European Commission. The country is also demonstrating progress in terms of its economic readiness and full alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign

²⁶ Kristijan Turkalj, negotiator for Chapters 23 and 24 for the Republic of Croatia; State Secretary at the Ministry of Justice; and former Acting Minister of Justice of the Republic of Croatia. [Presentation at the 11th session of Working Group 3.](#)

²⁷ Regional Cooperation Council, [Balkan Public Barometer 2025.](#)

²⁸ President of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, Afrim Gashi: “I want to remind you that the Republic of North Macedonia has reached a level of institutional maturity that requires us to maintain strategic clarity. In this regard, moving beyond rhetoric, I am here to assure you that the strategic interest of the Republic of North Macedonia is clear and unwavering; our future, without a doubt, lies in the European Union... In a turbulent world with ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East, and beyond, integration into the European Union is neither a luxury nor an option.” – Excerpt from the speech delivered at the [Eighth Plenary Conference of the NCEU](#), held at the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, 26 November 2025.

²⁹ [Council of the EU, 2025, pp. 2–3.](#)

and Security Policy.³⁰ However, persistent shortcomings in the effectiveness of the judiciary, the prevention of corruption, media independence, and parliamentary accountability mean that reforms may not always deliver the desired results³¹. Albania combines relatively low costs for regulatory and institutional alignment with persistently high political and financial costs for addressing challenges in the areas of the rule of law and the media, which helps to explain why formally ambitious reforms and rapid progress in opening chapters may still yield only partial or fragile results. Regarding the implementation of Albania's reform agenda, it is considered to be centrally managed and personalized, with the executive branch playing a dominant role. This means that political will exists, but it is more concentrated around leadership structures than embedded in stable institutional mechanisms.³²

In the Republic of North Macedonia, European integration is deeply politicized and further burdened by identity and constitutional issues. The polarization between the government and the opposition has transformed the EU agenda into a verbal battlefield, driven more by the logic of blockade than by the pursuit of correction. There is solid technical readiness in certain chapters, but also a lack of a stable domestic political consensus, which affects the implementation of reforms—a trend that is regularly reflected in the European Commission's reports. The Republic of North Macedonia is facing, not so much high costs of regulatory alignment, but rather extremely high costs of sovereignty and identity, as further compliance is de facto linked to concessions regarding language, history, and constitutional identity without commensurate and credible progress in the accession process.³³

Serbia is cited as an example of “strategic ambiguity,” as it balances between the European Union and other geostrategic partnerships. Serbia has the longest experience in accession negotiations in the region, with 22 chapters opened. However, since the start of the war in Ukraine, Serbia has neither opened nor provisionally closed a negotiating chapter. On the one hand, it has made significant progress in economic integration, with the EU accounting for nearly 60% of its trade.³⁴ Furthermore, over the past year, Serbia has witnessed mass student protests, a repressive response from the authorities, and a deteriorating environment for critical media and civil society, which further reinforces the perception of partial and fragile political re-

³⁰ Andrej Semenov, “[Reform Without Transformation: The EU's Diminishing Leverage in the Western Balkans.](#)” *Social Sciences* 14, no. 12 (2025): 722.

³¹ [European Commission 2025b, pp. 1, 7.](#)

³² [Albania: Freedom in the World, 2025 Country Report.](#)

³³ [North Macedonia: Freedom in the World, 2025 Country Report.](#)

³⁴ Andrej Semenov, [Reform Without Transformation: The EU's Diminishing Leverage in the Western Balkans.](#) *Social Sciences*, 2025, Volume 14(12), 2025.

forms.³⁵ Unlike the Republic of North Macedonia, which clearly positions the EU as its sole alternative, Serbia pursues a multi-vector foreign policy approach, which has prompted criticism regarding its deviation from the European Common Security and Defense Policy.

In summary, the Western Balkans does not lack strategies, roadmaps, or action plans. However, there is a lack of political courage and institutionalized action in the reform processes. Political will in the region is predominantly tactical, while political polarization is systemic—an interplay that turns European integration from a transformative process into an endless transition.

THE WESTERN BALKANS: FROM TERRITORIAL FRAGMENTATION TO AN INTEGRATED REGIONAL AREA FOR COOPERATION

According to existing analyses, the lines of political division among the Western Balkan countries can be overcome through each new regional initiative. Ongoing disputes cannot be resolved immediately, tensions still exist, and, in an analytical context, the question arises: Can the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU progress despite disintegration tendencies? The answer is, of course, positive. Fragmentation does not necessarily preclude integration, although it can slow it down³⁶.

Within the current architecture of EU enlargement, regionalization is increasingly being established as a functional prerequisite for Europeanization, with financial support instruments playing a central role in the transformation of the Western Balkans. This initiative aims to transform the Western Balkans from a region characterized by significant political fragmentation into a region of cooperation. The activities of the National Conventions in the Republic of North Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia, united under the regional initiative “Let Justice Rule the Region,” sparked increased interest in monitoring reform processes from a regional perspective, thereby broadening the analytical horizons of the participants (over 1,000 participants across the three countries) as well as those of a wider circle of citizens.

Early regional initiatives have made a significant contribution to shaping the new generation of policies and to developing a regionally oriented logic of accession. Although based on the model of conditional functional integrati-

³⁵ "The majority of Serbian media outlets are subject to political pressure and nearly total control by the government. Serbia's situation is not good. However, on the other hand, we have a strong mobilization of civil society, of the civic sector, which sets a good example and achieves certain results." – Duško Lopandić, Vice-President of the European Movement in Serbia, university professor, and former Ambassador of Serbia to the European Union, [Eighth Plenary Conference of the NCEU](#), 26 November 2025.

³⁶ Marco Zoppi, [Futures of the Western Balkans: Fragmentation and Integration in the Region and Beyond](#), Springer Briefs in Political Science, Springer Nature, 2023.

on, the countries of the region have been encouraged to develop common regulatory frameworks, to establish cross-border infrastructure and institutional networks, and to undertake joint initiatives in development policies.

One of the first significant regional initiatives was the Berlin Process, launched in 2014 by Germany with the aim of keeping the focus of the Western Balkan countries on the European perspective at a time when the European Union's enlargement process was at a standstill. Although not a formal part of the accession negotiations, it serves as a complementary framework for maintaining the reform momentum and strengthening regional cooperation, as well as for fostering political will for EU accession. Through regular summits at a high political level (Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Trieste, London, Poznań, Sofia, Tirana, and others), the process has established a stable platform for political dialogue between the Western Balkan countries (WB-6) and key European Union Member States.

The mission of the Berlin Process is multifaceted and encompasses strengthening regional economic integration, improving infrastructure and energy connectivity, promoting reconciliation and resolving bilateral disputes, and deepening alignment with European Union policies and standards. As part of the process, the concept of the Common Regional Market was developed, which is an official EU-supported framework for economic approximation in the Western Balkans, based on the EU's four fundamental freedoms (the movement of people, goods, services, and capital). The Common Regional Market is closely linked to the EU's broader agenda of "gradual integration" and was later further reinforced through the EU's Growth Agenda for the Western Balkans.

A significant institutional achievement of the Berlin Process is the establishment of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO, 2016), which serves as the first regional mechanism for youth exchange and confidence-building among young people in a post-conflict context. At the same time, several regional agreements were reached on mobility, mutual recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications, the use of identity cards for travel, and the simplification of administrative procedures, which directly reflect the logic of the EU single market.

One of the initiatives that was also institutionally driven is the "Open Balkans." This initiative resurfaced amid a stagnation in the EU enlargement process due to changes in enlargement policies during 2019. In essence, the Open Balkans is a regionally and politically driven effort to enhance cooperation among the three Western Balkan countries—Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia—without being formally conditioned by the

European Union.³⁷ Cooperation is coordinated through leaders' summits, working groups of line ministries, and implementation through national administrations. The mission of the Open Balkans initiative is to enable citizens and companies in the region, in an EU-style approach, to prepare for the application of the four fundamental freedoms: a) elimination of border checks or simplification of procedures to reduce waiting times and trade costs; b) mutual recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications; c) easier access to the labor market and electronic procedures for work permits among the three countries; and d) cooperation in areas such as civil protection, agriculture, tourism, and culture. Hence, this process has been dubbed "Mini-Schengen."³⁸

The most significant outcome of the initiative is the Agreement on Free Access to the Labor Market, signed at the Tirana Summit in December 2021. Under this agreement, Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia committed to enabling the free movement, residence, and employment of their citizens without work or residence permits. One of the four EU freedoms—free movement of workers—was partially implemented. After a period of stagnation and political turbulence in 2022/2023, the process was reasserted in early 2024 with the signing of implementation protocols in Skopje, linked to the mechanisms of CEFTA 2006.³⁹

Although the implementation of the Agreement stalled after a politically turbulent period (2022–2023), the initiative was reactivated in early 2024, when the implementation protocols, colloquially linked to the CEFTA 2006 mechanisms, were signed in Skopje.

³⁷ Due to their preference for the EU process over regional initiatives, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo rejected the proposal to join this initiative.

³⁸ [The Open Balkans Initiative is delivering results: North Macedonia has seen continuous growth in trade with Albania and Serbia since the launch of the initiative.](#) In 2023, trade from North Macedonia to Serbia increased by 31% compared to the previous year, while trade from Serbia to North Macedonia increased by 14%.

³⁹ The Western Balkans had to create their own framework for regional economic integration as a result of the shift to CEFTA 2006, which came after Central European countries left the agreement following their EU membership. The region's countries, including Moldova, adopted CEFTA with the 2006 amendments as a means of gradually approaching the EU single market. Mechanisms to boost intraregional trade are included in the agreement. [The majority of Western Balkan countries show a high degree of preparedness for membership in the trade and economic sectors throughout 2024, according to the European Commission.](#)

Table 2: Key initiatives for the implementation of the “Open Balkans”

Date	Location	Major decisions and events	Key outcome
October 10, 2019	Novi Sad	Launch of the “Mini-Schengen” initiative by Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia	Initiation of the political process and agreement on the principles of free movement
November 2019	Ohrid	Expansion of the agenda (movement of people, recognition of documents, economic cooperation)	Defined thematic areas of cooperation
December 21, 2021	Tirana	Signing of the Agreement on Free Access to the Labor Market	Most concrete achievement: partial implementation of the freedom of movement for workers
July 2022	Skopje	Formal renaming to “Open Balkans” + package of agreements for administrative facilitation	Attempt to institutionalize the initiative
June 2023	Ohrid	Summit amid apparent political stalemate and divergent visions for the future of the process	Slowed momentum; public doubts about sustainability
January 23, 2024	Skopje	Signing of implementation protocols related to CEFTA 2006	Limited “revival” of the process after a period of stagnation

These initiatives are preceded by broader initiatives, such as the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP),⁴⁰ which operates as a regional intergovernmental organization and a political and diplomatic forum involving 13 countries in South-East Europe, established in 1996. Meetings of heads of government, meetings of foreign ministers, meetings of speakers of parliaments, and meetings of other political leaders are held to discuss security, political, and economic issues closely related to Euro-Atlantic integrati-

⁴⁰ [South-East European Cooperation Process \(SEECP\)](#).

on.⁴¹ As part of this cooperation process, the Regional Cooperation Council was established⁴² as its operational mechanism (February 2008), succeeding the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, with a mandate to operationalize the political priorities of regional cooperation agreed within the SEECP and to transform them into concrete programs aligned with the European integration process.

At the regional level, the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative⁴³ (RAI) also operates, ensuring coordination and exchange of anti-corruption policies in line with EU standards. It is also important to mention the Migration, Asylum, and Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI)⁴⁴, which promotes a common approach to migration management and border security.

WESTERN BALKANS GROWTH PLAN

The Western Balkans Growth Plan establishes a qualitatively new approach through the so-called “reforms-for-funds” principle, whereby financial support is linked to measurable reform progress, and regional cooperation is integrated as a horizontal component of national reform agendas. This instrument not only strengthens conditionality but also redefines the very nature of enlargement: from a process of formal alignment with the *acquis* to gradual economic and institutional convergence based on shared regional priorities in areas such as infrastructure, energy, digital transformation, and mobility.⁴⁵

Regarding the Republic of North Macedonia’s approach to the Growth Plan, it can be noted that the focus is on Cluster 1, “Fundamentals,” with a strong emphasis on the rule of law, anti-corruption policies, the digitalization of the judiciary, and the professionalization of public administration. The approach is largely technocratic, meaning that reforms are articulated through precisely defined institutional steps and measurable indicators. However, the key challenge remains their consistent and effective implementation, especially in the areas of high-level corruption and the efficiency of the judicial system.

For the Republic of North Macedonia, the Growth Plan is, above all, an instrument for restoring the credibility of the reform process. According to expert

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² [Regional Cooperation Council \(RCC\)](#).

⁴³ [Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative \(RAI\)](#).

⁴⁴ [Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative \(MARRI-RC\)](#).

⁴⁵ “The Western Balkan countries’ Growth Plan offers a genuine chance to advance the negotiation process. We believe that this process is quickening and placing all of the Western Balkan nations in a competitive position; maybe this is one of the benefits that will result in quicker outcomes.” Mileva Gjurovska, President of the European Movement in the Republic of North Macedonia, [Expert Meeting: ‘Let Justice Rule the Region’](#), 27 November 2025.

assessments, tangible and visible progress can be achieved only if the institutions targeted by the reforms adopt a substantive and responsible approach to the set goals, recognizing the strategic importance of the process. “At its core, the Growth Plan, like the accession methodology itself, positions fundamental values and the rule of law as ‘non-negotiable’ prerequisites. Without measurable and sustainable progress in this area, reforms in other sectors inevitably lose their substance, as well as their transformative potential.”⁴⁶

Albania has a more focused and aggressive reform narrative regarding the judiciary, building on the already initiated “vetting” process. Its agenda is strongly focused on cleaning up the judicial system, combating organized crime, and improving the business climate. Compared to the Republic of North Macedonia, Albania demonstrates greater political mobilization around reforms and views the Growth Plan as a means of accelerating economic convergence and attracting investment, with a clearer focus on the private sector.

Serbia takes a different approach: its Reform Agenda is the broadest in scope, with a strong focus on macroeconomic stability, infrastructure, energy, and digital transformation, while reforms in the rule of law are present, but with a predominantly political focus. For Serbia, the Growth Plan is more of a development and investment instrument than a transformative tool for democratic governance, which makes its implementation economically oriented and significantly less institutionally oriented. According to experts, Serbia’s Growth Plan and the broader national reform agendas “risk becoming tools for simulating progress rather than delivering real change.” Financial incentives maintain the illusion of reform, while implementation remains blocked by captured state institutions and political predominance.⁴⁷

At the same time, traditional pre-accession mechanisms, particularly the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), are increasingly shifting towards multilateral formats, with a growing share of funds being allocated to regional and cross-border programs. This indicates a shift in the philosophy of EU support: funds are no longer viewed primarily as a tool for individual institutional alignment, but rather as a catalyst for creating a connected regional area that learns to operate according to European standards even before formal membership.⁴⁸ Consequently, regionalization is gradually being institutionalized as an operational mechanism for the “Europeanization” of a

⁴⁶ Hristina Berovska Konevska, State Advisor at the Ministry of European Integration, [Expert Meeting: 'Let Justice Rule the Region,'](#) 27 November 2025.

⁴⁷ Bojana Selaković, National Coordinator of the National Convention, Serbia, [Expert Meeting: 'Let Justice Rule the Region,'](#) 27 November 2025.

⁴⁸ Under the IPA III Program 2021/2027, the budget amounts to €14.2 billion for national and regional programs, twinning initiatives, and technical assistance.

broader territory. EU financial instruments act as structural drivers of interconnectedness, political coordination, and economic convergence. In this sense, the European process does not flow exclusively from Brussels to the national capitals, but rather through a regionally mediated process.

Regional initiatives in the field of justice are implemented through specific instruments for cross-border cooperation in criminal matters, including Eurojust, which establishes Joint Investigation Teams (JITs). Eurojust facilitates the secure exchange of evidence, coordination meetings between prosecutors and courts, and the synchronization of parallel investigations in multiple countries. In addition, there are regional initiatives for trial monitoring and case-based peer reviews, supported by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE),⁴⁹ which establish a common analytical framework for assessing the quality of judicial proceedings in corruption and organized crime cases.

On the other hand, in recent years, there has been a continuous and institutionalized involvement of the Western Balkan countries in the work of key bodies and processes of the European Union, which is gradually deepening their integration into the European political and institutional domain. Thus, through structured dialogues and consultative formats, representatives from the region participate in the activities of the European Economic and Social Committee, particularly within the framework of the EU–Western Balkans Joint Consultative Committees, which bring together social partners and civil society organizations from Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. These formats enable the exchange of policies and recommendations in areas such as social dialogue, economic development, and the rule of law.

At the same time, the countries of the region are becoming increasingly involved in the EU’s Rule of Law Mechanism, through regular expert missions, thematic dialogues, and the preparation of national contributions on the judiciary, anti-corruption, and media freedoms, which are used as an analytical basis in the European Commission’s annual rule of law reports. Although they are not formally part of the same monitoring cycle as the Member States, this involvement creates a common methodological framework and leads to the gradual harmonization of indicators and standards. Thus, the Western Balkans is increasingly positioning itself not only as an object of enlargement but also as a partial participant in European governance. The harmonization of regulatory and administrative practices among the countries

⁴⁹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), [The Western Balkans Trial Monitoring Report: From Paper to Practice – Evaluating the Effectiveness of Judicial Responses to Serious Organized Crime and Corruption](#), Review Period July 2021 – March 2024, OSCE, 2024, (2024).

of the region is also a key prerequisite for the functional establishment of the Common European Market⁵⁰ and its gradual convergence with the single market of the European Union.

The rule of law entails harmonized and compatible institutional standards in the areas of the judiciary, public prosecution, public administration, and anti-corruption mechanisms. Structural asymmetry would undermine the overall regional reform impact and result in a low level of achievement of the objectives of the Growth Plan. Therefore, regional cooperation emerges as an instrument for harmonizing regulatory and administrative practices and for enhancing legal certainty.

CHAPTER 23, JUDICIARY AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Chapter 23, Judiciary and Fundamental Rights is a cornerstone of Cluster 1, Fundamentals, because progress in the judiciary demonstrates the maturity of the state in terms of upholding the rule of law. This means that this chapter constitutes the very architecture—one might say the backbone—of the system. Chapter 23 poses the following questions: how does the justice system function, are laws applied equally to all, and do institutions possess the capacity and autonomy to resist political and economic pressures, among other issues?

Progress in Chapter 23 is measured using initial, interim, and final benchmarks, where success is not only the adoption of laws but also the achievement of tangible results. This chapter is highlighted as a true “stress test” for the system, in the sense of determining to what extent the state can genuinely resist political influence, prosecute the powerful who abuse their official positions, and establish institutions that operate free from partisan interference. Unlike the technical chapters, this chapter tests the genuine political will and the maturity of the institutions to implement reforms in all areas.

Analyses of the effectiveness of the judiciary conducted at the regional level reveal the following:⁵¹

1. There is a gap between formal progress and practical implementation. The shortcomings are not manifested solely at the level of

⁵⁰ European Commission, [Common Regional Market](#).

⁵¹ The [Western Balkans Trial Monitoring Report](#) is an OSCE study that monitored court cases from 2021 to 2024 in Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro. Monitoring of high-profile organized crime and corruption cases was prioritized. Overall, 265 cases pertaining to organized crime and corruption were examined; these cases were split among the following jurisdictions: approximately 48 in Albania, 55 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 54 in Kosovo, 58 in Montenegro, and 50 in North Macedonia.

individual capacity but extend to the institutional, legislative, and political levels.

2. Inadequate quality of indictments and judgments. Discrepancies have been identified between the factual description and the legal classification, along with insufficient reasoning and the absence of a precise assessment of economic damage.
3. Poor results from confiscation and plea bargaining. Asset forfeiture remains an underutilized tool in the fight against organized crime and corruption. Plea bargains are rarely used strategically. They typically do not ensure the effective confiscation of criminal assets.
4. An unsatisfactory level of independence and transparency of the judiciary, which remains a matter of concern, especially with regard to the influence of powerful public and private actors.
5. Poor efficiency in case management and overall efficiency. Insufficiently reasoned judgments, which regularly lead to retrials.
6. Inadequate material and human resources. Judicial institutions face serious material and human resource challenges, particularly in the area of financial investigations, which affects performance as well as judicial actors' perception of the value of their own work.
7. Lack of clear ownership and implementation of reforms. Insufficient commitment and the absence of a genuine sense of ownership over reforms, which limits their effectiveness.
8. Accountability and data. Most judicial systems focus on quantitative output indicators rather than on substantive outcomes, which limits evidence-based decision-making.

As an analytical foundation for monitoring progress in European integration, in addition to the European Commission's traditional Progress Report, the new mechanisms introduced in 2024 are becoming increasingly important. Of particular importance is the Rule of Law Report, which for the second time covered the Western Balkan countries and provides a more detailed sectoral assessment of the judiciary, anti-corruption efforts, and institutional independence. The Reform Agenda, linked to the Growth Plan, which tracks specific reform steps and measures reform capacities, also has significant analytical value.⁵²

In terms of judicial independence, all three countries exhibit significant weaknesses. Although all jurisdictions have established legal frameworks de-

⁵² "The European Commission's assessments are based on defined indicators and measurable criteria, which is why certain stages and deeper procedural dynamics are not always fully visible or equally represented in the reports." – Aleksandra Deanoska Trendafilova, part of the discussion at the ["Expert Meeting: Let Justice Rule the Region"](#), 27 November 2025.

signed to ensure a certain degree of independence, the level of independence is not satisfactory. Judicial councils, which are supposed to guarantee independence, are facing criticism for their lack of transparency and susceptibility to political pressure. Furthermore, the appointment and promotion processes lack transparency, and merit-based criteria are not always adhered to, which prevents the judiciary from functioning as an autonomous professional system. This implies that the careers of judges and prosecutors do not depend on the quality of their work, but rather on political, institutional, or personal networks, which encourages the development of a culture of loyalty rather than a culture of integrity. This leads to self-censorship, i.e., judges learn “what pays off” if they want a promotion.

Financial independence is particularly important when it comes to the independence of the judiciary. In the Western Balkans region, the issue of financial independence is being discussed in a highly concerning manner. Financial independence is not limited to the formal provision of budgetary funds; rather, it entails genuine institutional control over resources: budget planning and allocation, salaries of judges and judicial staff, human resources, and investments in infrastructure and digitalization. When these decisions are concentrated in the hands of the executive or legislative branch, the judiciary remains structurally dependent, even though it is formally declared independent.

Financial dependence creates a persistent risk of indirect political pressure. There is no need for direct interventions against judges; budget cuts, delays in hiring, or a lack of funds for training are sufficient to foster institutional caution and self-censorship. Political influence is not exerted through explicit orders, but also through control over resources.

Insufficient financial capacities directly impact the efficiency of the justice system. The low salaries of court clerks contribute to the ongoing turnover of these essential staff members, whose numbers in the courts have already been significantly reduced. The lack of adequate administrative and technical support slows down court proceedings, reduces the quality of court decisions, and leads to a backlog of cases. In this context, financial independence is not a matter of professional comfort, but of functionality. Financial dependence transforms the judiciary from an autonomous guardian of justice into a structure that survives thanks to political goodwill. And that is precisely where the deepest crisis of the rule of law begins: when justice has to wait for budgetary approval.

One of the criteria for assessing the independence of the judiciary used in the EU's rule of law mechanisms is the quality of the judiciary, which is defined as the extent to which the judicial system possesses institutional, human, technical, and procedural capacities. It encompasses: (1) the profes-

sional competence and ongoing training of judges and prosecutors; (2) the clarity, reasoning, and consistency of court decisions; (3) the transparency and public availability of proceedings and judgments; (4) a functional court administration and adequate human resources; (5) digitalization and efficient case management; and (6) effective access to justice for citizens and companies. Quality is an intermediate category between independence and efficiency: even a formally independent judiciary cannot be considered high-quality if it suffers from a lack of resources, weak administrative support, inconsistent case law, or limited transparency.

The efficiency of the judiciary refers to the ability of the judicial system to process cases in a timely, continuous manner and with reasonable resources, and to render final decisions. Within the European Commission's methodology, efficiency is measured using specific operational indicators: average duration of proceedings, clearance rate, backlog, compliance with procedural deadlines, and the capacity of courts to prevent the accumulation of backlogged cases.

As an integral component of the Growth Agenda for the Western Balkans, the Reform Agenda aims to promote a more profound institutional transformation of the justice system and enhance its institutional resilience. In this context, a review of the mechanisms for recruiting, selecting, appointing, evaluating, promoting, and dismissing judges and prosecutors is planned, with the aim of aligning them with the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission. At the same time, the plan includes the adoption and implementation of an action plan to combat corruption in the judiciary, as well as the enhancement of the regulatory framework governing the functioning of the Judicial Council.

Regarding the steps defined in the Reform Agenda of the Republic of North Macedonia, efforts to implement them were intensified in the second half of 2025. In this context, a package of laws aimed at reforming public administration was adopted, including the Law on Public Administration, the Law on Administrative Officers, and the Law on Public Sector Employees, which establish a clearer legal framework for human resource management in the public sector. At the same time, the Law on the Judicial Council was adopted, which introduces more clearly defined criteria for evaluating judges and specifies disciplinary procedures. Additionally, efforts to update the regulations governing the functioning of the Public Prosecutor's Office have been intensified.

The reform momentum in the judiciary has been complemented by measures for functional digitalization, including the establishment of automated case management systems in the courts and the Public Prosecutor's Office, the strengthening of the resources and capacities of the Prosecutor's Office.

es for Organized Crime and Corruption, and the expansion of investigative centers. In fact, the first successes of the Reform Agenda were achieved with the adoption of several systemic laws aimed at improving the digital infrastructure of the public sector, including the Law on Electronic Management and Electronic Services, the Law on Electronic Documents, Electronic Identification and Confidential Services, as well as the Law on Information Security. These laws provided a regulatory framework for the development of integrated digital public services. In this context, digitalization is viewed not only as a technical modernization but also as a tool for enhancing the transparency, accountability, and efficiency of institutions.

Table 3: Synthetic indicators of institutional governance and rule of law (World Bank WGI, 2024) (percentile rank 0–100)

Country	Rule of Law	Political stability	Control of Corruption	Regulatory Quality	Transparency and Accountability	Governance Effect	M
Albania	54.93	66.24	39.34	57.00	56.63	57.41	55.26
North Macedonia	53.09	68.56	41.19	59.06	58.14	50.71	53.09
Serbia	53.52	63.01	36.50	56.10	48.70	53.32	51.86

Source: [Worldwide Governance Indicators](#)

The data in the table indicate that all three countries—Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia—are in the middle zone of institutional performance. Albania has the highest aggregate score (M = 55.26), primarily due to its relatively better scores on political stability and governance effectiveness, but it remains weak in terms of corruption control (39.34).⁵³

North Macedonia demonstrates the highest political stability (68.56) and relatively strong regulatory quality (59.06), but a weaker governance effect (50.71), indicating a gap between formal policies and their practical implementation.

Serbia has the lowest overall mean score (M = 51.86), with particularly low scores for control of corruption (36.50) and transparency and accountability (48.70), which indicates limited democratic capacity and vulnerability of institutional autonomy.

The common pattern is as follows: relatively stable regulatory frameworks, but structural weaknesses in the rule of law, anti-corruption capacities, and

⁵³ World Bank, [Worldwide Governance Indicators](#).

democratic accountability, which supports the argument of “reforms on paper” with a limited transformative effect in practice.

COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE RULE OF LAW IN ALBANIA, NORTH MACEDONIA, AND SERBIA

Albania

At present, Albania is experiencing a very clear reform “momentum,” which analysts attribute to the completed “vetting” of judges and prosecutors—a process in which over 60% of candidates were either dismissed or resigned, indicating the scale of the problems in the judicial system.⁵⁴ Albania’s success in the EU integration process is based on effective “time management,” which other countries in the region have not achieved. The message coming from Albania is: “It’s time for everyone to hurry so that we can all get on the same train.”⁵⁵

In the area of judicial reform, a significant success has been achieved through the establishment of a new institutional architecture within the judiciary. The High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council and the Special Prosecutor’s Office for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime have been established. The Special Prosecutor’s Office for Combating Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) was established as part of the reform framework and conducts investigations and prosecutions against high-ranking officials in the country. These measures have made it possible to prosecute high-ranking officials and strengthen the integrity of the system. It is estimated that over 80 high-ranking public officials have been formally charged with corruption or abuse of power.

To implement the “vetting” process, institutions such as the Independent Qualification Commission, the Special Appellate College, and the Institution of Public Commissioners have been established, which conduct re-evaluations of judges and prosecutors based on their assets, integrity, and professional capabilities. In order to implement judicial reform, Albania has undertaken several constitutional reforms.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ermelinda Mucaj, European Movement Albania, [Eighth Plenary Conference](#), 26 November 2025.

⁵⁵ Entela Saliu, European Integration Department, Albanian Ministry of Interior, [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

⁵⁶ Analytical evaluations reveal that the Albanian government implemented drastic judicial reforms with the primary assistance of foreign partners in the form of financial and technical support, as well as the direct participation of foreign experts in the reform process, in order to fight impunity and corruption, lessen political influence over the judiciary, and strengthen the

In 2024, Albania allocated €28.2 per capita for the judiciary, the lowest level in the region and below the Western Balkans average, with 57.5% of the funds allocated to the courts, 41.6% to the prosecutor's offices, and 0.9% to legal aid.⁵⁷ Although there was a significant increase in the budget for the courts during the 2019–2024 period (mainly due to salary increases), the system still lags behind the regional benchmark.

The efficiency of the judiciary has improved only at the first-instance level, where the case clearance rate (CR) was over 100%. However, in the appellate courts, particularly in civil and commercial cases, the CR is only 42%, and the average case duration reaches approximately 15 years (5,496 days), indicating a significant structural backlog. In second-instance criminal cases, the duration is approximately 4.5 years, indicating increasing pressure on the system. According to analyses (CEPEJ 2024), the “vetting” process has reduced the number of active judges and prosecutors, which means that, despite improvements, the system remains unevenly efficient and understaffed. Analyses from the Western Balkans Trial Monitoring Report⁵⁸ also confirm that Albania is making progress in finalizing court cases (out of 48 cases between July 2021 and March 2024, 30 cases were finalized). However, the report notes that a significant number of cases continue to circulate through various court instances, which contributes to reduced efficiency in the judiciary.

Throughout 2024, the judiciary used two case management systems (CMS), CMIS and ARKIT, which are considered outdated and operate through local installations in various courts. The implementation of the roadmap for the development of a new, unified judicial ICT system is underway; this system will be implemented in phases and aims to improve digitalization, interoperability, and standardization, with a proposed five-year timeframe for full implementation.

Regarding independence and impartiality, the situation is satisfactory; however, it is noted that attempts at undue influence, i.e., pressure from public officials (politicians), continue to occur.

Regarding efficiency and digitalization, there are ambitious planning initiatives with a budget allocated for a modern, integrated electronic case management system, but its full implementation is scheduled for 2030.

protection of civil rights. From the presentation by Gilda Rushi, an independent expert from Albania, [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

⁵⁷ In comparison to the WB-6 average, which allocates €35.4 to the judiciary and €12.8 to the prosecution per capita, €16.2 was spent on the judiciary and €11.7 on the prosecution. [Council of Europe. CEPEJ. 2024.](#)

⁵⁸ Organisation for Security and Co-operation (OSCE), [The Western Balkans Trial Monitoring Report](#), From Paper to Practice Evaluating the Effectiveness of Judicial Responses to Serious Organised Crime and Corruption, Review Period July 2021 - March 2024.

In the EC reports, the assessments indicate that the country is between “moderately prepared” and, in some areas, “well prepared” in terms of the functioning of the judiciary.

Republic of North Macedonia

According to the Rule of Law Report, the country is positioned between a “somewhat prepared” and a “moderately prepared” level, with no notable overall progress in Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights).

The country has made significant progress in preparing strategic documents. In its third year of implementation, the 2024/2028 Judicial Reform Strategy is showing some results, but also uneven progress. The Council for Monitoring the Implementation of the Strategy, established in 2023, has been minimally active, which prevents timely monitoring and the implementation of corrective measures. According to the findings of the report prepared by the EU Rule of Law Project, the strategy’s implementation rate in 2024 was 42.9%.⁵⁹

Over the past five years (2020/2024), the number of judges in North Macedonia has decreased by nearly a quarter, which can be attributed to the high number of retirements and the lengthy, at times controversial, process of training new judges. Throughout 2024, the judiciary operated with 363 judges and 170 prosecutors, concurrently experiencing an increased caseload. In 2025, the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors overcame the backlog in training the new generation of candidates who applied in 2024, and an additional 97 law graduates were employed. As a result, a ratio of 19.9 judges and 9.3 prosecutors per 100,000 inhabitants was established, which remains below the EU average (22.9 and 11.1).⁶⁰ According to estimates by the competent authorities, an additional 273 judges and 169 prosecutors would be needed for the judiciary to function normally. Although the number of judges is only one of the factors for the effective functioning of the judiciary, staffing levels are an important prerequisite for addressing the problem of understaffed courts and prosecutors’ offices in the country’s interior. This shortage is partly due to the pause in the procedures for recruiting and hiring judges during the 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections.

There is also a shortage of trained court and public prosecution clerks. In September 2023, the Union of Workers in Administration, Judicial Bodies, and Citizens’ Associations (UPOZ) publicly protested, demanding a 78% salary increase, which elected and appointed officials have already received.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Justice, Promotion of [the 2024 Annual Report on the Implementation of the Sectoral Development Strategy for the Judiciary 2024–2028](#).

⁶⁰ [European Commission Report on the Republic of North Macedonia](#), 2025.

Due to low salaries, court and prosecution clerks have been leaving the sector.⁶¹

According to the European Commission's 2025 Rule of Law Report, the lack of financial resources continues to pose a serious problem for the judiciary. The actual budget for the judiciary is significantly lower than what is stipulated by law, which limits the independent and efficient functioning of the judicial system. Funds allocated to the judiciary amount to approximately 0.29% of GDP, whereas, according to the legally stipulated framework, they should amount to approximately 0.8% of GDP.⁶²

In December 2025, the Law on the Judicial Council was adopted. According to experts, the Law on the Judicial Council contains improved provisions, primarily those related to the election and accountability of the members of the Judicial Council, as well as the President of the Judicial Council. The provisions on the disciplinary accountability of judges have also been improved, as has a very important issue: the right of appeal for candidates whose rights are affected by the decisions of the Judicial Council.⁶³

Furthermore, the measures aimed at enhancing transparency in the operations of the Judicial Council and the Council of Public Prosecutors were assessed as effective. These measures include regular press briefings, recorded or live-broadcast sessions, and the publication of transcripts, statements, and decisions on their websites and social media outlets. However, the Councils have not yet addressed the lack of transparent justification regarding appointments, promotions, and disciplinary proceedings, which affects their independence and impartiality.⁶⁴

Public trust in the judiciary in the Republic of North Macedonia is very low, while external and political interference is a serious concern. In the public domain, media statements by high-ranking politicians highlighting low trust are very common, without a corresponding critical perspective on the other branches of government, which, according to national surveys, also enjoy low

⁶¹ According to [an analysis of the human resources situation in the courts and public prosecutors' offices in the Republic of North Macedonia](#), the ratio between the number of judges and other judicial staff indicates a serious imbalance in the distribution of human resources within the judiciary. There are notable variations in the number of court clerks per judge, despite the fact that these courts are of the same level and jurisdiction. This suggests that there are unclear and ineffective staffing standards. There is a structural imbalance in workload and efficiency because the number of court clerks per judge varies from less than three to more than fourteen, with the national average being 5.59. The equal access to justice principle is compromised by this circumstance, which also lowers institutional productivity.

⁶² [Law on Budgets](#).

⁶³ Bojana Bosilkova, Head of the Negotiations and Integration Unit at the Ministry of Justice, [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

⁶⁴ Global Legal Insights, [Litigation & Dispute Resolution Laws and Regulations 2025 - North Macedonia](#).

levels of public trust. Such statements can also be characterized as political influence, as well as a form of pressure that fuels citizens' negative perceptions in order to further erode public trust.⁶⁵ According to the Rule of Law Report 2025, only 28% of citizens and 26% of companies in North Macedonia believe that courts and judges are “fairly or very independent.”

According to Council of Europe (CEPEJ, Council of Europe) indicators, the decline in the efficiency of the judiciary is closely linked to the lengthy duration of court proceedings and the high number of backlogged cases. The average duration of court proceedings is approximately 3.10 years, while in high-crime cases it reaches 8.5 years, with approximately 4.7 years spent on the investigative stage alone.⁶⁶

The Republic of North Macedonia has achieved a high ICT score in the area of case management information systems (ACCMIS), with an implementation and usage rate ranging from 95% to 100% for all case types. The system enables the random assignment of cases, electronic transfer, anonymity of decisions, and electronic signatures, which the Council of Europe has recognized as a unique solution in the region. Efforts are currently underway to further digitize the system, which would improve interoperability with external institutional systems. A significant shortcoming is the analytical statistics, which provide basic data on the progress of cases and offer limited analytical capabilities, thereby reducing the ICT score. A new system is being developed for the Prosecutor's Office, which is expected to become operational in 2027 (CEPEJ, 2024).

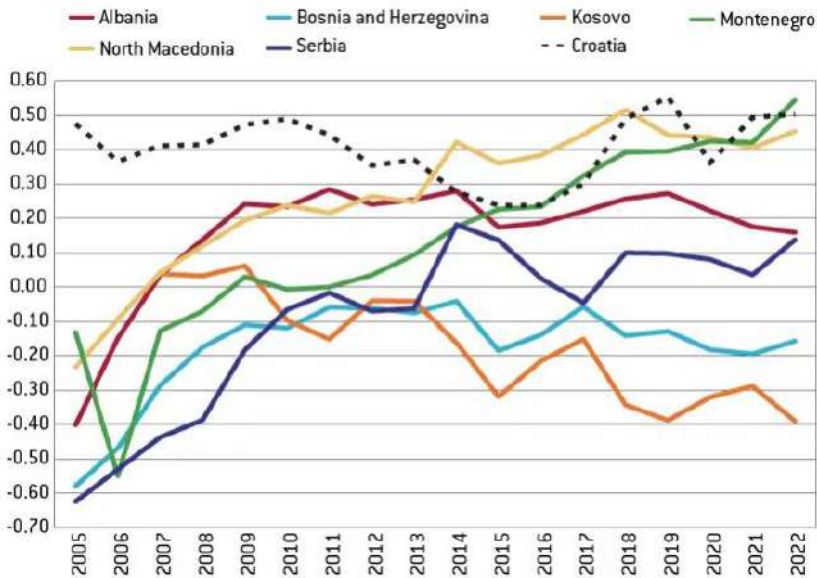
In terms of professional development, 208 training sessions (in-person, hybrid, or online conferences) were conducted in 2024, with a total of 4,395 participants, including 1,298 judges and 753 prosecutors. Funds amounting to €1.09 per capita were invested, which is above the Western Balkans average (€0.86). Continuing education is mandatory, with a minimum of two days per year.

⁶⁵ “We pay the most and receive the least, but there are no outcomes, no justice, no quality, and no reforms. Instead of focusing (by judges and prosecutors) solely on higher salaries, they should get down to work and demonstrate results from their work to justify their current salaries, which are already the highest in the region,” statement by a senior official from the current ruling party. “North Macedonia devotes a larger percentage of its resources to the judiciary than much more powerful European nations, but there is virtually no efficiency or justice.” [Netpress](#), 21 November 2025.

⁶⁶ [European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice, CEPEJ, 2024](#).

According to experts in the field, during 2025, as part of efforts to implement the reform agenda, several reform laws were adopted, both in the area of public administration and in the area of digitalization. However, there are still unfulfilled tasks that, although behind schedule, efforts are being made to complete within a reasonable timeframe.⁶⁷

Figure 12: World Governance Indicators, regulatory quality (estimate), 2005-2022



Bruegel: [The changing dynamics of the Western Balkans on the road to European Union membership: an update](#)

Serbia

According to the EC Progress Report on Serbia under Chapter 23, the country has achieved a certain level of preparation, but no progress was made during 2024/2025.⁶⁸ The rule of law faces serious obstacles in terms of

⁶⁷ “This concerns the implementation of the human resources management strategy in the prosecutor’s offices, the adoption of a package of laws to regulate salaries in the four categories within the judiciary, the filling of vacancies at the Agency for Confiscated Assets, and the establishment of a regular process of initial training at the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors”—part of the presentation by Bojana Bosilkova, Head of the Negotiations and Integration Unit at the Ministry of Justice, [‘Expert Meeting: Let Justice Rule the Region’](#), 27 November 2025.

⁶⁸ “Serbia and Montenegro were at the forefront of the European integration process in 2018. But not a single chapter has been opened for Serbia in the last eight years, particularly since 2021. Our government has been unable to fulfill the essential requirements of the re-

independence and impartiality, with significant political pressure and an inadequate institutional response. “At present, there is talk in Serbia of a general social and political crisis, characterized by the executive branch’s significant supremacy over the other branches of government, both the parliament and the judiciary, as noted by our experts and highlighted in the annual reports and recommendations issued by the European Commission.”⁶⁹

According to CEPEJ data, the budget for the judicial system in Serbia in 2024 was €64.3 per capita, significantly higher than the Western Balkans average (€49.3). It increased significantly in 2023, by 16%. The total allocation is 0.51% of the national GDP, which is slightly below the regional average (0.53%). The courts absorbed 75.2% of the funds, while the prosecutor’s offices accounted for 21%, with the prosecutor’s office showing the most significant annual growth (+42.4%).

However, investments in court infrastructure and digitalization remain limited; 64.9% of the court budget continues to be allocated to gross salaries, indicating a funding model focused primarily on ongoing expenses rather than on the structural modernization of the system as such.

Serbia has a relatively well-developed ICT infrastructure, with multiple case management systems (CMSs) in use, which are expected to be integrated into a single SUPER SAPS system. This indicates that, although Serbia has widely deployed digital tools, the system remains technically fragmented and still incomplete. As in other countries in the region, interoperability remains a weak link, with no centralized databases of decisions covering the entire end-to-end digital case workflow. A better digital infrastructure is provided in the administrative courts, which have more advanced dashboards that offer insights into the duration of cases, the number of hearings, appeals, and the number of parties. In May 2025, the High Judicial Council began recording and publishing its sessions, thereby achieving greater transparency.

Accountability and transparency. Regarding disciplinary practice: In 2024, there were 125 disciplinary complaints submitted to the High Prosecutorial

form agenda for more than a year. As a result, to date, Serbia has not received any funds from the Reform Agenda, nor grants or financial support from the Growth Plan, apart from the initial funds allocated without any special preconditions,” from the presentation by Duško Lopandić, Vice-President of the European Movement Serbia, [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

⁶⁹ Ibid. After a canopy collapsed at the railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, killing sixteen people, Serbia saw widespread protests and demonstrations. The accident was linked to poor reconstruction and unprofessional construction work, according to public reactions, some experts, and opposition figures. These findings raised serious concerns about institutional accountability, supervision of public procurement, and high levels of corruption in Serbia. Large-scale civil demonstrations centered on calls for responsibility, openness, and the rule of law were triggered by the tragedy.

Council, and 1 disciplinary measure was imposed (January 2025); at the High Judicial Council, there were 386 complaints (first instance), and 10 proposals submitted to the Disciplinary Commission (second instance), resulting in decisions of dismissal/sanctions.

In 2024, judicial training cost €6,648,763, which amounts to €1.01 per capita, placing Serbia above the Western Balkans average of €0.86. A total of 2,946 professionals (1,121 judges and 635 prosecutors) received training, which is significantly below regional benchmarks. Although many of the training sessions are mandatory, attendance rates are low, which affects professional capacity and group identification with peers in the same profession. However, training sessions on corruption and conflicts of interest, although not mandatory, were regularly attended (CEPEJ 2024).

Serbia is a country with an exceptionally high level of female participation in the judiciary. Thus, 73% of judges are women, as are 65% of prosecutors.

Table 4: Comparative analysis of the situation in the judiciary based on CEPEJ data and the European Commission’s Country Reports for the Western Balkans.

Parameter	Albania	North Macedonia	Serbia
EU readiness (Chapter 23)	2.5/5	2/5	2/5
Progress in 2025	Certain progress	No progress	No progress
Independence and impartiality	Satisfactory, but with ongoing attempts at political pressure,	Serious concerns about political interference and public comments on the judiciary by high-ranking officials.	Unsatisfactory, significant political pressure and public comments on court cases.
Judicial Council (governance)	New judicial institutional architecture.	Judicial Council under political pressure, new Law on Judicial Council adopted, further implementation of recommendations from the EC, Peer Review Mission, Venice Commission, GRECO.	High Judicial Council is functional, but with a limited institutional response to pressure.
Accountability and disciplinary practices	Implementation of the “Vetting” process – the most powerful integrity mechanism –	Formally, there are improved disciplinary mechanisms (79 complaints against judges – 3 sanctions; 3 against	According to data from the High Judicial Council of the Republic of Serbia for 2024, 386 complaints were

	conducted on 800 judges and prosecutors; approximately 50% did not pass the vetting process.	prosecutors – no decisions); slow and non-transparent procedures without systematized data (CEPEJ 2024).	filed against judges and 125 against prosecutors in Serbia, but only a small number resulted in sanctions.
Efficiency – case backlog	Significant structural backlog in case resolution, particularly in civil (66%) and administrative (24%) courts; Clearance Rate (CR) below 100% (backlog).	Clearance rate below 100%; high backlog; greater backlog in appellate courts, civil cases (84%), and administrative cases (72%). Positive trend in criminal cases (104%).	Uneven efficiency across categories: first-instance civil and commercial cases have a high clearance rate (CR above 100%); administrative cases have a CR of around 76%. At the second-instance level, civil cases have a CR above 100%, while criminal cases are slightly below, indicating stabilization.
Human resources capacity	Limited human resource base: 12.1 professional judges and 7.4 prosecutors per 100,000 inhabitants (318 professional judges). (CEPEJ)	Ongoing staff shortages and limited human resources, with 21.4 judges (approximately 390) and 9.2 prosecutors (approximately 170) per 100,000 inhabitants, as well as approximately 137 attorneys—above the WB average.	High level of staffing capacity, with 40.2 judges (a total of 2,636) and 130 court clerks per 100,000 inhabitants – significantly above the Western Balkans average (29). Approximately 10 prosecutors and 191 attorneys per 100,000 inhabitants are registered.
Digitalization (case management)	Integrated CMS under development; full implementation after 2030.	Fragmented systems; ACCMIS is functional but lacks an integrated end-to-end model.	SAPO is operational in the prosecutor's offices, but the courts still lack an integrated, unified CMS.
Public trust in the judiciary	Low, but showing a trend of stabilization	Very low	Low

CHAPTER 24, JUSTICE, FREEDOM, AND SECURITY

Chapter 24 covers areas related to alignment with the common policies and standards of the European Union, namely: border and migration management, visa policy, asylum, police and judicial cooperation, and other security issues. At its core is the establishment of a system that will ensure the security of citizens, free movement, and the effective protection of fundamental rights. While Chapter 23, Judiciary and Fundamental Rights establishes the legal and institutional framework for an independent judiciary, fundamental rights, and anti-corruption, Chapter 24 is intended to ensure its effective functioning in practice. If Chapter 23 answers the question “Is the system properly designed?”, Chapter 24 answers the question “Does the system work in practice?” Through Chapter 24, the EU assesses the country’s ability to protect its citizens, enforce the law, and manage risks. Drafting laws is not enough to build a state governed by the rule of law.

In 2024, the EU adopted a package of four directives in the field of criminal law, which are to be transposed into the national legislation of candidate countries: the Directive on the Recovery and Confiscation of Property; the Directive on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence; the Directive on Environmental Crime; and the Directive on Strengthening the Criminal-Law Framework against Organized Crime and Serious Crime, with a focus on harmonizing definitions, sanctions, and cross-border cooperation.⁷⁰ All of this indicates that the area of justice, freedom, and security is taking on a central role in the current phase of EU consolidation, especially in the context of strengthening the rule of law and building capacity to respond effectively to external geostrategic challenges. The war in Ukraine, the growing instability in the neighboring region, hybrid threats—including disinformation, cyberattacks, and foreign political influence—and the instrumentalization of migration flows underscore the need for greater institutional resilience and a coordinated security approach. In this context, the issues of strategic autonomy and the protection of democratic systems are becoming a permanent feature of the European agenda, with the rule of law being posi-

⁷⁰ [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1260](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on asset recovery and confiscation;

[Directive \(EU\) 2024/1385](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024, on combating violence against women and domestic violence;

[Directive \(EU\) 2024/1203](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024, on the protection of the environment through criminal law and replacing Directives 2008/99/EC and 2009/123/EC;

[Directive \(EU\) 2024/1226](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024, on the definition of criminal offenses and penalties for the violation of Union restrictive measures and amending Directive (EU) 2018/1673.

tioned not only as a core value but also as a prerequisite for political stability and security resilience.

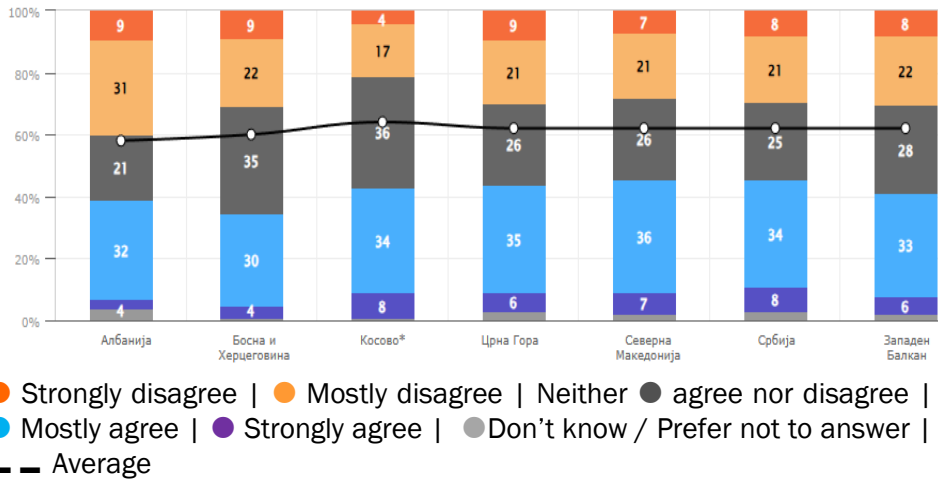
In such circumstances, the rule of law is no longer treated solely as an internal normative value, but as an issue of security and geopolitical stability. Weak justice systems, corruption, and institutional vulnerability create “soft spots” in the European security space, which facilitate the penetration of organized crime, misuse of funds, and foreign influence. Therefore, strengthening judicial independence, combating corruption, and effectively managing borders are becoming integral components of a broader strategy to safeguard Europe’s political and security order.

Within the scope of Chapter 24, the regional perspective is of particular importance, given that organized crime, money laundering, human trafficking, and migration flows are transnational in nature and necessitate a coordinated response. In this regard, over the past decade, the Western Balkan countries have established robust cooperation mechanisms through structures such as the Regional Cooperation Council, the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI), and the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), which enable institutionalized information exchange, joint training, and coordinated activities.

Positive examples within Chapter 24 include the increasingly frequent joint operational actions against migrant smuggling, human trafficking, and organized criminal networks, which are carried out in coordination with Europol and Frontex. In recent years, the Western Balkan countries have been increasingly active in participating in Joint Investigation Teams, regional operational actions, and intelligence sharing, which has enabled the identification of transnational criminal groups and a better mapping of illegal migration routes.

Data on the security environment in the Western Balkans indicate that the region is facing security-related challenges. A significant percentage of citizens (39%) consider the Western Balkans a safe place to live, while only 8% of respondents expressed full agreement. The highest sense of security was reported in Montenegro (42%), followed by Albania (40%). Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia report higher levels of insecurity. It is noteworthy that citizens express greater confidence in the security of their own countries (52%) than in the region as a whole (39%), which may indicate moderate regional cohesion. Concerning the region’s future security, there is a sense of caution. Specifically, only 31% believe that the region will be safer in the next 12 months, while a significant portion of the population expresses concern about possible interstate disputes (48%), terrorist attacks (41%), and civil unrest (40%).

Chart 1. Do you consider the Balkans to be a safe place to live?



Source: [2024 SecuriMeter survey](#), Regional Center of Cooperation

Traditionally, the EU has treated the Western Balkans as an “external security perimeter” through dedicated policies, reports, and enlargement instruments. However, in practical terms, the region is entirely geographically surrounded by Member States, which means that security risks do not stop at the formal border between the EU and the countries of the Western Balkans. Security issues in the Western Balkans should be considered holistically, as criminal networks operate transnationally, migration flows first pass through Member States, and then flow into the EU via the Balkans. Furthermore, financial flows and money laundering are linked to banking systems in Member States, while radicalization and organized crime exhibit strong cross-border connections. Current EU initiatives take this perspective into account. The EU is increasingly implementing practical operational cooperation with the region through agencies such as Europol and Frontex, border management agreements, and joint investigation teams, which could help overcome the traditional view of the Balkans as a “powder keg.”

This approach is of crucial importance for the region, but also for the EU, as the stability of the Western Balkans directly affects the resilience of the European security area. In this situation, resolving bilateral conflicts, providing political support for reforms, and promoting useful cross-border cooperation are all important aspects of regional stabilization, which is not a one-way process. Bilateral problems lead to additional frustrations during the accession process, which may also affect common security objectives. An integrated approach involves uniting technical cooperation with political alignment, recognizing the Western Balkans as an essential component of the

broader European security framework, rather than a remote periphery that could serve as a sanctuary for criminal organizations.

ORGANIZED CRIME

The European Commission's 2025 reports indicate that in Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia, there exists a significant structural gap between formal compliance with EU legislation and the practical effectiveness of institutions in combating organized crime. Although Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia have established strategic frameworks, specialized organizations, and legislative modifications in accordance with European standards, persistent staff shortages, insufficient funding, and inadequate institutional coordination continue to hinder the implementation of these measures. What they all have in common is a form of "reform formalism" and an excessive use of reform rhetoric, where discussions about change frequently center on an ambiguous "future time" that lacks precise definition.

Organized crime functions as an alternative economic and social system, guided by its own rules of profit, loyalty, and protection. It is not random crime, but a carefully organized operation that takes advantage of weak institutions, divided jurisdictions, and corruption. Modern organized crime does not work solely within the traditional mafia-style hierarchy anymore. Today, flexible network structures prevail, giving these activities a worldwide reach. A network approach means the groups are loosely connected, each specializing in functions like logistics, transport, finance, or corruption, and having multiple centers of power that allow quick and easy access to instructions. Corrupt systems maintain themselves through mutual trust built on family or ethnic ties or financial dependence, as well as by forming close bonds through bribery, cultivating political connections, and exploiting legal frameworks for protection. Therefore, tackling it cannot rely solely on repression. Institutional interoperability, the ability to carry out financial investigations, effective regional and international collaboration, and a robust, independent judiciary are all crucial.⁷¹

Expert analyses indicate a substantial disparity between the advanced digital landscape in which modern organized crime thrives and the largely ana-

⁷¹ "Physical boundaries, time zones, and national jurisdictions are no longer relevant to crime. Global electronic communications make it possible for fraud and criminal offenses to be committed internationally, frequently without the victims or authorities being aware of it. Smartphones in particular are sophisticated digital platforms with vast data storage, transfer, and modification capabilities that go beyond simple communication tools." Vladimir Milosheski, Public Prosecutor at the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Skopje, excerpt from his presentation at [the Eighth Plenary Conference](#) of NCEU-MK, 26 November 2025.

log methods still employed by justice systems. This disparity raises a number of important issues, such as how prepared the Western Balkans region is to take on criminal networks that can easily operate across international financial systems and digital platforms. Are digitalization initiatives largely confined to political rhetoric, while the collection and presentation of evidence continue to rely on paper-based methods, with only limited adoption of advanced digital technologies? Finally, what does digitalization mean in the context of criminal justice? Does it all come down to technical modernization, or is a significant improvement in digital skills, analytical abilities, and standards for updating criminal procedures necessary?⁷²

Deepfakes, a form of synthetic digital forgery made possible by modern technology, allow for advanced manipulation of voice, video, and digital identities, introducing a new wave of risks in the realm of organized crime. Criminal networks gain a powerful tool for financial fraud, blackmail, money laundering and undermining trust in institutions by creating false testimonies, fraudulent 'corporate orders', fictitious digital identities and compromising video footage. These practices are already being used in complex schemes involving social engineering, impersonation of executives, and manipulation of evidence, which directly complicates the work of prosecutors' offices and courts.

Such phenomena were largely unanticipated by existing legislation, which was predominantly analogue. This has created significant gaps in criminal law protection, particularly with regard to the authentication of digital evidence, establishing liability for synthetic content and tracing transnational digital footprints. In the context of organized crime, this means that criminal groups are one step ahead of institutions in terms of technology, using artificial intelligence and digital platforms to hide their infrastructure and financial transactions. Therefore, the digitalization of the justice system cannot be reduced to mere technical modernization. Rather, it must encompass the development of specialized digital skills, forensic expertise and new procedural standards in order to effectively prosecute modern, technology-enabled forms of organized crime.

Criminal networks in the Western Balkans operate across multiple jurisdictions, using them for logistics, money laundering, storing weapons, and evading criminal prosecution. This makes traditional investigations based on national jurisdictions structurally inadequate. European practice shows that the best results are achieved through joint investigation teams (JITs), synchronized arrests and coordinated prosecution strategies, supported by mechanisms such as Eurojust and Europol. The Fifth Evaluation Report of the Network of National Experts on Joint Investigation Teams (JITs), which is

⁷² Ibid.

based on 67 practical evaluations conducted between 2022 and 2024, confirms that this model is one of the most effective tools for tackling organized crime and cybercrime, which is becoming increasingly prevalent across borders. Despite the challenges posed by different legal systems, cooperation with third countries and technical constraints, establishing joint investigations at an early stage significantly facilitates coordination among countries. The effectiveness of joint interviews coordinated case management, and the use of undercover investigators is enhanced by intensive knowledge sharing. Reports from Joint Investigation Teams suggest that this approach successfully dismantles criminal networks, yields concrete prosecution results in the form of imposed sanctions and enables the confiscation of significant assets. The number of joint investigation teams has increased from 126 in 2019 to 327 in 2024, demonstrating the particular success of joint teams in tackling cybercrime. A high volume of cases was supported, including 13,000 cross-border investigations, of which 5,363 were newly registered. As part of these operations, over 1,200 suspects were arrested and assets worth around €1.3 billion were seized or frozen, along with illegal drugs worth approximately €19.6 billion.⁷³

A joint approach is being developed at the regional level through the Western Balkans Criminal Justice Project. Supported by the EU and implemented through Eurojust, this initiative aims to strengthen judicial cooperation between the Western Balkan countries and EU Member States. It focuses particularly on supporting Joint Investigation Teams, facilitating direct communication between prosecutors' offices, providing practical assistance in complex cross-border cases, offering training and expert support for financial and digital investigations, and integrating Western Balkan countries into Eurojust's operational mechanisms. Regional cooperation enables the systematic, real-time exchange of operational and intelligence data, which is crucial for the early detection of criminal patterns, identification of financial flows and mapping of networks.

Although regional platforms such as SELEC play an important role in connecting police services, their impact remains limited without strong prosecutorial coordination. Experience shows that, in the absence of coordinated prosecutorial strategies, criminal groups exploit legal system fragmentation and choose countries with legal loopholes (also known as forum shopping) to avoid sanctions.

From the EU's perspective, regional cooperation is an important technical tool and an indicator of institutional maturity. This has a direct impact on the effectiveness of financial investigations, the management of confiscated assets and the finalization of complex cases in the judicial system. The lack of

⁷³ Eurojust. (2024). [Eurojust Annual Report 2024. The Hague: Eurojust.](#)

coordinated criminal proceedings leads to a low rate of final convictions and minimal confiscation of criminally obtained funds, which undermines the preventive role of the justice system. In the European model of the rule of law, regional cooperation is therefore treated as a prerequisite for transitioning from formal harmonization to genuine operational integration within the area of freedom, security and justice.

Comparative analysis of the situation in the field of security: Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia.

Albania

Albania demonstrates a high level of specialization in investigating organized crime, as evidenced by the activities of its anti-corruption and prosecutorial bodies. These initial steps are linked to the Specialized Structure for Organized Crime and Corruption (SPAK), which has already set a good example, particularly when it comes to prosecuting high-profile cases. Other notable accomplishments include the National Strategy for Combating Organized Crime (2026–2030) and the Strategy on Small Arms, Light Weapons and Explosives. Both strategies are in line with European Union standards. This formal body of fulfilled obligations includes the new Criminal Code, which has been aligned with 14 EU directives covering areas such as human trafficking, money laundering, illegal weapons and the confiscation of assets.⁷⁴

Issues related to financial investigations are becoming increasingly relevant on a regional level. However, full alignment of national legislation with European directives has not yet been achieved in this area. Reports from the European Union consistently highlight the need for further alignment with the legal framework for combatting organized crime, particularly with regard to the use of special investigative measures and the systematic analysis of illicit financial flows.⁷⁵ The financial dimension of organized crime is strengthening, with clear guidelines for improving the regulatory and institutional frameworks for confiscating and managing seized assets. These frameworks are underdeveloped, and financial investigations rarely serve as a central instrument of criminal prosecution. Furthermore, the alignment of sensitive areas such as human trafficking, cybercrime and the control of small arms and light weapons with European standards is fragmented, resulting in limi-

⁷⁴ Entela Saliu, European Integration Department, Albanian Ministry of Interior, [Eighth Plenary Conference of NCEU-MK](#), 26 November 2025.

⁷⁵ These are the following directives: Directive (EU) [2014/42/EU](#) – Freezing and Confiscation; Directive (EU) [2018/1673](#) – Money Laundering through the Regulatory Mechanisms of Criminal Law; Directive (EU) [2017/541](#) – Terrorism, for the adoption of relevant investigative techniques.

ted operational outcomes. According to experts, legislation on the control of small arms and light weapons is currently being drafted.⁷⁶

Albania stands out as one of the more active countries in the region when it comes to joint investigation teams. It participates in 34 such teams, which indicates its increased operational integration into European mechanisms for combating organized crime.

Republic of North Macedonia

Although North Macedonia has a relatively stable legal framework and established security systems, it still struggles with significant issues in investigative centers, managing seized assets, and ensuring the functional independence of intelligence agencies, all of which weaken the effectiveness of prosecution and prevention efforts. A major concern is the limited resources within institutions, largely due to recruitment policies that are not based on a true “merit” system. In security, just like in other fields, the principle of fair representation for minority ethnic groups is upheld, along with the principle that guarantees party loyalty.

Main strategic documents are often drafted following the European Union model, including the adoption of the new Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment. However,⁷⁷ this approach can be challenging if the documents are not well-tailored to the specific national context and the real capabilities of local institutions.

In reform processes, the focus often ends up on creating strategies and policies, with the assumption that this alone will meet the country’s obligations in the EU process. In this case, high productivity is reached, but implementation of such strategies shows much less success. Basically, these documents are not meant for citizens to read, and most do not. They are really aimed at the institutions and governments responsible for putting the reform agendas into action. While many stakeholders are involved in creating strategic documents, the government and its institutions often face challenges when it comes to putting them into practice. People tend to notice reforms by how they affect daily life, and in this case, the impact often falls short. Part of the problem also comes from how strategic documents are put together. Without a proper upfront review of the institutions’ real human, technical, and financial capacities, even the most closely aligned strategy with European standards is unlikely to achieve the desired end results. Consequently, commendation for a developed strategy should not stop at its

⁷⁶ Entela Saliu, European Integration Department, Albanian Ministry of Interior, [Eighth Plenary Conference](#) of NCEU-MK, 26 November 2025.

⁷⁷ [EU Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment 2025 \(SOCTA\), 2025.](#)

inception but rather at its effective application and acknowledgment in the habits and daily operations of organizations and society.

Inadequate coordination between important stakeholders, such as the police, the prosecutor's office, the courts, and financial institutions, and the lack of a clearly defined entity accountable for the outcomes further impedes implementation. Rarely are strategies supported by consistent budgeting, methodical training, or the hiring of top-notch new employees; as a result, they are reduced to paper documents with no practical implementation. This is especially true in the fields of asset confiscation and financial investigations, which continue to be marginalized despite playing a crucial part in the European strategy against organized crime. Instead of institutionalization and long-term systemic integration, frequent political shifts and a lack of continuity lead to a “reset” of reform processes.

One of the main components of the European recommendations pertaining to the rule of law is the system for the confiscation and management of assets obtained through criminal activity, which the Republic of North Macedonia has improved in recent years through institutional and legislative measures. A major step was taken with the adoption of the Law on Confiscation of Assets in Civil Proceedings⁷⁸, which adds a new method to the existing criminal and extended confiscation procedures for the forfeiture of assets obtained illegally. There is a risk of legal loopholes and uneven application of legal provisions, though, because there are some overlaps and ambiguities in the practical application of the different types of confiscation.

The efficacy of the confiscation system is limited not only by legislative obstacles but also by institutional factors. Institutions like the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) and the Financial Police Office, which are in charge of financial investigations, data analysis, and asset identification, struggle traditionally with a lack of technical and human resources.

A special challenge is bringing national laws into compliance with the new European standards, especially Directive (EU) 2024/1260⁷⁹ on the seizure and confiscation of assets in criminal cases. To guarantee legal certainty and improve the effectiveness of asset forfeiture processes, the Criminal Code's extended confiscation provisions must be adjusted.

The management of already confiscated assets is another major issue. In order to guarantee transparent and expert management of confiscated assets, enhanced institutional coordination, improved record-keeping, and cle-

⁷⁸ Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, no. [53/2024](#).

⁷⁹ Directive (EU) [2024/1260](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 April 2024 on asset recovery and confiscation.

arer procedures are required in practice, even though the legal framework offers mechanisms for managing seized assets.

Despite their formal existence, the Asset Recovery Office (ARO) and the Agency for the Management of Confiscated Assets are institutionally underdeveloped in the field of financial crime and asset confiscation, with significant shortcomings in terms of human resources, budgetary resources, logistical support, and case management. The Public Prosecutor's Office's Asset Recovery Office plays a crucial role in identifying, tracking, and exchanging information internationally regarding assets obtained through criminal activity. This office, which serves as the national point of contact for the European network of Asset Recovery Offices, is crucial in assisting with financial investigations, supplying details about suspected individuals' assets, and promoting international collaboration in confiscation procedures.

With only two joint investigation teams, North Macedonia has a much lower level of participation, indicating limited operational integration into European cross-border investigation mechanisms. In actuality, joint investigation teams have a lot of potential to conduct complex financial investigations and prosecute organized crime groups, but this data suggests that there are institutional and possibly political obstacles to ongoing involvement.

Serbia

Systemic issues with the independence of prosecutors' offices and subpar judicial performance continue to be Serbia's biggest problems, giving rise to a perception of selective justice and impunity. The country is dealing with a complicated and dynamically unbalanced reform process in the area of preventing and prosecuting organized crime, just like Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia.

Serbia has made some headway in putting in place legal and judicial tools to fight organized crime, such as offices of specialized prosecutors and laws that deal with asset confiscation and anti-money laundering. However, in reality, these operational capabilities are still constrained, mainly because of a lack of staff and the impact of political considerations on the processes of investigating corruption and high-profile criminal cases.⁸⁰

Serbia participates in 18 joint investigation teams and plays a significant role in Eurojust's operational architecture. Serbia has actively participated in several joint investigation teams, including in cases related to cybercrime, and regularly participates in coordination meetings, which indicates its significant position in the regional organized crime network (drug trafficking, cy-

⁸⁰ European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document, [Rule of Law Report Country Chapter on the rule of law situation in Serbia](#), 2025.

ber fraud, money laundering, etc.). Reports from the European Union and Eurojust, however, concurrently point to a subpar legal outcome: a lack of final convictions, a shoddy confiscation procedure, and a strong sense of political influence over the prosecution.

The Western Balkan countries are thought to be advantageous transit and coordination hubs for international criminal networks, especially for money laundering and the trafficking in drugs and weapons. These countries are frequently evaluated as having a high level of exposure to organized crime, a significant cross-border component, and strong ties to criminal organizations both inside and outside the EU. Criminal networks often choose these countries as those with more favorable jurisdiction (also known as “forum shopping”).

Although qualitative data (interviews with experts, victims, and convicted individuals) show that most illegal markets are in fact controlled by such criminal networks, current analyses show that only about 12% of those convicted of serious crimes are officially identified as members of organized criminal groups. The number of final convictions is still low despite a notable rise in the number of prosecutions, pointing to structural flaws in the gathering of evidence, the initiation and building of prosecution cases, and the administration of justice.⁸¹

Drug trafficking is the most prevalent of the major illicit markets, accounting for more than half of all convictions pertaining to criminal organizations, while human trafficking has the largest share (29%). Migrants pay several times at various locations along the way to their country of destination, and the operation of migrant smuggling involves clearly defined routes and a division of roles.

While lower-ranking offenders are typically prosecuted and the organizers and leaders remain out of the reach of justice, criminal groups in the area are adaptable, have a loose hierarchy, and usually recruit through family and social networks. Profits from transnational trafficking, especially drug trafficking, are usually invested and laundered outside the region, while they are used locally to support luxurious and expensive ways of living.

One important systemic finding is that, in order to evade institutional scrutiny, the use of extreme violence and innovative technologies is relatively limited, while corruption is the primary enabler of organized crime. This leads to a “low visibility, high impact” model in which criminal networks continue to operate but are not adequately defined by the law.⁸²

⁸¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2020). [Measuring Organized Crime in the Western Balkans: Illicit Markets and Criminal Groups](#). Vienna: UNODC.

⁸² Ibid.

Table 5: Organized crime and resilience index – Western Balkans (2025)

[Global Organized Crime Index 2025](#)

Country	Crime Index	Criminal market	Criminal actors	Resilience Index
Albania	5.20	4.90	5.50	5.17
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5.92	5.43	6.40	3.88
Kosovo	4.85	4.70	5.00	5.08
Montenegro	5.82	5.13	6.50	4.83
North Macedonia	5.00	4.80	5.20	5.29
Serbia	6.18	5.67	6.70	4.92

PREVENTING AND COMBATING CORRUPTION

Corruption is a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon that directly threatens the foundations of a democratic institutional structure. It is a systemic phenomenon influenced by the political and institutional architecture, culture, and legal traditions of the Western Balkan countries rather than the product of isolated individual abuses.

The phenomenon of “state capture,” in which powerful political and economic elites systematically use public institutions as a resource to maintain and reproduce their power, is identified by corruption analyses as the primary cause of systemic state-level corruption. Political influence over the judiciary and regulatory agencies, the selective application of laws, and control over public procurement procedures—where the public interest is subordinated to vested interests—are some ways that this phenomenon shows up.

Although, formally, there are institutional arrangements for preventing and combating corruption⁸³, as well as a legal framework that can provide a satisfactory level of corruption control⁸⁴, the results often remain unsatisfactory. For instance, in order to show activity in this field, efforts to create more anti-corruption bodies—such as commissions, councils, working groups,

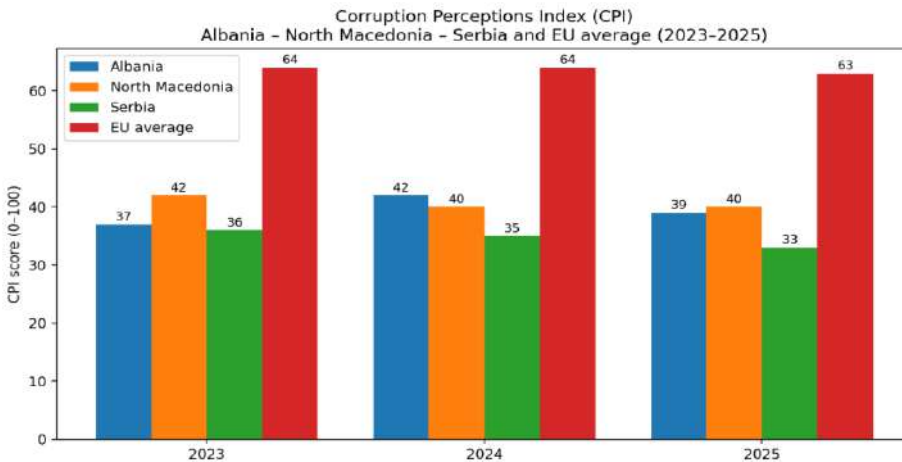
⁸³ In the Republic of North Macedonia, the key institutions for preventing and prosecuting corruption are the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (SCPC), the Public Prosecutor’s Office (including the Basic Public Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime and Corruption), the Public Revenue Office, and the Ombudsman; in addition, there is a Deputy Prime Minister responsible for good governance and anti-corruption policies.

⁸⁴ [Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest](#), Official Gazette No. 12/19.

and the like—are made far more frequently in the Macedonian context.⁸⁵ The government established a new body in April 2025 with the responsibility of coordinating all other important institutions.⁸⁶ When the state consistently creates new bodies in addition to the anti-corruption institutions that are already in place, it usually means that there is an issue with how well the current institutions are working. The fight against corruption becomes increasingly more expensive as a result of the very horizontal expansion of institutions without bolstering those that already exist. Institutional formalism is the term used to characterize such actions, which serve to publicly show that there is political will to address the issue without actually activating the institutions in any significant manner. The competent institutions are further exonerated from accountability by the establishment of new bodies. The conclusion is that there is structural impunity because high-ranking officials are rarely the subject of investigations, prosecution, while such court cases take a long time in order to become time-barred, and even sanctions are largely symbolic.

The region's countries routinely receive low scores on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, indicating a state of “normalized” corruption in the system's daily operations.

Chart 2: Corruption perceptions index 2023–2025,



Source: Transparency International

⁸⁵ [New anti-corruption body launched](#), Radio Free Europe, 8 April 2025.

⁸⁶ State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, Ministry of the Interior, Public Prosecutor's Office, Financial Police, Public Revenue Office, Customs Administration, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Finance, and others. [New anti-corruption body launched](#).

The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) trend for Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia from 2023 to 2025 is depicted in the graph; lower values correspond to higher levels of corruption. The data indicates that the region is on a visible downhill trend. North Macedonia shows stagnation (42 → 40 → 40). Albania showed a brief improvement in 2024 (37 → 42 → 39), but in 2025 dropped to 39 points and fell 11 places in the global ranking (91st place worldwide). Serbia is ranked 116th globally and lowest in the region, indicating a persistent decline (36 → 35 → 33).

The creation of a so-called state-level “equilibrium with high corruption” is the theoretical explanation for systemic corruption.⁸⁷ Conditions are set up for corruption to become a common and widely tolerated phenomenon when people believe it to be pervasive. This indicates that people deliberately and purposefully decide to take part in it because they think they have no other choice and that everyone else will follow suit. When faced with challenges in fulfilling certain necessities of daily life, even those who would prefer to act honorably in theory are compelled to comply with the prevailing practice in their society.

One of the main facilitating mechanisms that allows corruption to spread from the political to the institutional and economic levels and take over as the prevailing model of governance is known as “political clientelism.” Government administration jobs for loyalty, tenders for political support, and administrative benefits for party affiliation are examples of the logic of exchange of services and favors that takes the place of institutional rules. Oligarchic structures and a politically mediated market result from the economy's steady concentration around a few businesses near the government. This not only makes competition more distorted, but it also makes the connections between political and economic power even stronger.

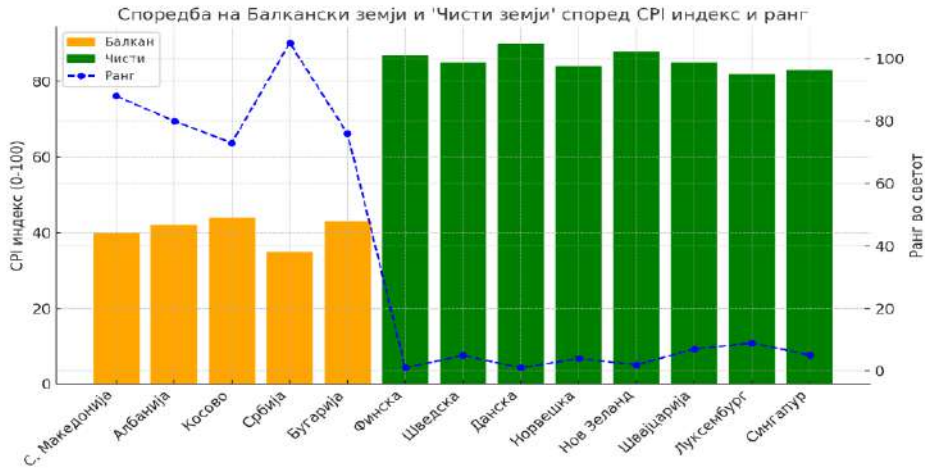
At the social level, such a system results in behaviors that are more adaptable: people report corruption less frequently, they learn survival skills (“if you don't bribe, you don't get”), while they eventually come to accept corruption as a “normal” and tolerated aspect of daily life.

While the European integration process introduces formal conditionality, reforms are often cosmetic and selective, creating an “implementation gap”—a difference between the laws on paper and their real-life application—that allows a corrupt system to remain stable under the guise of “reforms.” In order to comply with a requirement imposed by European integration, formal reforms are put into place to prevent and combat corruption. However, these reforms are tactical in nature and are intended to get around high-level corruption. In this situation, corruption not only undermines institutions but

⁸⁷ Rothstein, B. (2011). [The quality of government: Corruption, social trust, and inequality in international perspective](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

also modifies the social atmosphere, which is marked by distrust, apathy, and tolerance of common informal practices.

Chart 3: Comparison between the CPI scores of Western Balkan countries and the countries with the highest CPI scores



Source: [Transparency International Macedonia, 2025](https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi)

In the regional context, corruption remains a major challenge to the democratic consolidation and European integration of the Western Balkan countries. According to Transparency International's indicators, all countries in the region consistently rank below the EU average on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which points to systemic weaknesses in the rule of law, political influence, and the limited effectiveness of anti-corruption mechanisms.

Table 6: Preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central government (top executive positions) and law enforcement agencies.

Comparative assessment (Fifth GRECO Evolution Round 2025)

Country	Overall score (2025)	Steps implemented and steps for alignment
Albania ⁸⁸	<p>- 24 recommendations were made, of which 18 have been fully or satisfactorily implemented, five have been partially implemented, and one remains unfulfilled.</p> <p>The compliance procedure for this round has been formally closed.</p>	<p>- The central government has enhanced public consultations, adopted integrity plans in all ministries, and strengthened the independence of the Ethics Commission.</p> <p>- There is a need to reinforce measures to limit conflicts of interest, regulate contacts with lobbyists, and address the issue of the operational dependence of the police.</p>
Republic of North Macedonia ⁸⁹	<p>- 23 recommendations were made, with an assessment that 17 were satisfactorily implemented and 6 were partially implemented—the compliance procedure was closed in 2025.</p> <p>The compliance procedure for this round has been formally closed.</p>	<p>- Positive assessment of the implementation of reforms related to transparency, integrity, and rules for participation in government bodies, including improvements in data disclosure and a code of conduct for gifts.</p> <p>- Improvements to the sanctioning system and amendments to the Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflicts of Interest are needed.</p>

⁸⁸ [Fifth Evaluation Round](#), Preventing corruption and promoting integrity in central governments (top executive functions) and law enforcement agencies, second compliance report Albania.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Serbia ⁹⁰	- 24 recommendations were made: only 1 recommendation has been fully implemented, around 10 have been partially implemented, and the remaining 13 have not been implemented (Compliance Report 2024/2025).	- Serbia made progress in 2025, submitting additional GRECO reports, but most of the recommendations were not fully implemented.
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Although most countries formally adhere to the EU’s new anti-corruption regulatory framework and are members of the European Partners against Corruption⁹¹, in practical terms, there is a need for intensified efforts to achieve greater institutional functionality, with the expectation that political influence will be eliminated. In its recent annual reports, the European Commission has pointed out that the adoption of strategies and laws is an initial step towards aligning with European standards, but without their consistent implementation in practice, they remain at a formal level and do not produce tangible results in everyday life. The problems lie in investigations, lengthy court proceedings, and delays in reaching final verdicts, as well as inadequate sentencing, which contributes to a prevailing perception of impunity, particularly in cases of high-level corruption.

In the Macedonian context, the adaptation of legislation to benefit public office holders is often cited as the most typical example of high-level corruption. One of the examples that will likely be used in the future as a “textbook case” of interference in the legal system is the adoption of the amendments to the Criminal Code on 7 September 2023, which were passed under the so-called EU flag (expedited or “European-flagged” procedure) on the grounds that these amendments were urgent and necessary for EU harmonization of the relevant provisions. These amendments significantly reduced the penalty range for the offenses of abuse of office and criminal association. Specifically, the penalty for abuse of office was reduced from a minimum of three years in prison to a range of one to four years, while for criminal association, the maximum penalty was reduced from ten to three years. As a direct consequence of these amendments, a significant number of court cases related to high-level corruption became time-barred, thereby preventing their further criminal prosecution. The consequences of such legislative interventions are multifaceted and systemic.

Second, instead of implementing mechanisms to confiscate illicitly acquired assets and return funds to the national budget, the state faced financial im-

⁹⁰ European Commission, [Commission staff Working Document](#) - Serbia 2025 Report.

⁹¹ [European Partners Against Corruption](#) – EPAC.

plications in the form of compensation payments of over €170 million to the former suspects and detainees, which constituted a direct burden on public finances and indirect damage to the public interest. Third, such amendments have serious implications for institutional trust and the perception of the rule of law. Despite widespread criticism from the public and the European Union, the amendments still remain in effect, further complicating the process of aligning with European standards in the areas of the rule of law and the fight against high-level corruption.⁹²

The picture of systemic corruption in the Republic of North Macedonia is further completed by the so-called “Oncology Clinic case.” In 2023, following media investigations and institutional audits, serious abuses were detected at the Public Health Institution University Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology in Skopje. According to the findings of the investigation, there were suspicions of illegal procurement of expensive biological therapies and cytostatic agents, improper administration of therapy, and possible diversion or disappearance of medications, resulting in some patients not receiving the prescribed therapy or receiving inappropriate substitutes.

The Prosecutor’s Office initiated proceedings against several individuals, including former directors and high medical staff, on suspicion of abuse of office, malpractice, and organized actions contrary to legal procedures. According to official information made public, between 2018 and 2022, through illegal public procurements and fictitious procedures, damage to the budget exceeding MKD 2.2 billion was caused, and unlawful gains of over MKD 430 million were obtained.

The public reaction was extremely strong. Thousands of citizens protested in front of the government and various institutions, chanting “Murderers,” leaving symbolic “blood” palm prints on the streets, and demanding resignations, criminal accountability, and systemic reforms in the state healthcare system.

This case fundamentally exposes the depth of moral and institutional decay: when the most critically ill patients, whose lives directly depend on timely and appropriate treatment, fall victim to corrupt medical networks within the very institution that is supposed to treat them, then this is not only a case of financial crime but also a serious violation of the fundamental right to health care and dignified treatment.

⁹² Aleksandra Deanoska Trendafilova, “Amendments to the Criminal Code of September 2023 and European Standards for Preventing and Combating Corruption.” [Fourth Book of Recommendations – New Perspectives on Old Reform Dilemmas: The Republic of North Macedonia Facing the Challenges of European Integration](#), ed. Mileva Gjurovska (Skopje: National Convention on the EU in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025).

The court proceedings in the “Oncology Clinic” case, in which five individuals are indicted, are unfolding amid heightened public interest and significant pressure from the media outlets and citizens.⁹³ Only one person pleaded guilty and was given a suspended sentence. The trial is still ongoing.⁹⁴

Although the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as most countries in the region, is making progress in formally aligning with European directives, and many of them are members of regional and European anti-corruption networks, the region still faces a gap between the legal framework and real-life practice. The fight against corruption is a key bottleneck in the reform processes and in the EU accession process.⁹⁵

One of the largest corruption scandals in Albania is related to the construction of waste management incinerators. This is a highly controversial case, documented in detail by BIRN. The projects involved the construction of three facilities in Elbasan, Fier, and Tirana, which were implemented through public-private partnership agreements under the so-called “Build-Operate-Transfer” (BOT) model. This model entails long-term financial commitments for the state, an asymmetrical allocation of risks (where the state assumes the risk and the private partner retains the profits), as well as the potential for a significant fiscal burden due to high contract awarded amounts, an increased risk of non-transparent contracts, and limited competition.

This case involved senior government officials suspected of misusing public funds and awarding concession contracts under serious allegations of corruption. Throughout 2022, proceedings were initiated against 21 individuals and 12 legal entities for offenses related to corruption, money laundering, and abuse of public office.

In 2023, first-instance convictions were handed down against former ministers, businessmen, and other individuals in top management positions. However, in 2024, these convictions were overturned by a higher court, and the case was remanded for a retrial, which further complicated the legal outcome and intensified the public debate on the effectiveness and stability of judicial proceedings in high-level corruption cases.

⁹³ [Five Suspects in a €30 Million Crime at the Oncology Clinic](#), Voice of America – VoA, 31 January 2024.

⁹⁴ [Expert witness from Slovenia: “Pro forma” treatments and irregularities in the “Oncology case”](#), Racin, 11 February 2026.

⁹⁵ Aleksandra Deanoska Trendafilova, “Amendments to the Criminal Code of September 2023 and European Standards for Preventing and Combating Corruption,” [Fourth Book of Recommendations – New Perspectives on Old Reform Dilemmas: The Republic of North Macedonia Facing the Challenges of European Integration](#), ed. Mileva Gjurovska (Skopje: National Convention on the EU in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2025).

In order to accelerate the implementation of the public-private partnership, an environmental state of emergency was declared, thereby bypassing the standard procedures for awarding concessions. At the same time, instead of prioritizing waste selection and recycling, as stipulated in the national strategy, an incineration model was promoted by the government, which sparked significant legal, financial, and environmental controversies and outcries.⁹⁶

According to Transparency International, in Albania, the case known as “Metamorphosis,” which was handled by the Special Prosecutor’s Office for the Fight against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), attracted particular public attention. The case is significant due to the manner in which the investigation was conducted and developed—as a complex procedure linking high-ranking officials from security agencies, former judicial office holders, influential businessmen, and members of organized criminal groups suspected of serious criminal offenses.

SPAK initiated proceedings against multiple individuals based on extensive evidentiary documentation, supported by international cooperation with Eurojust, Europol, and other European security agencies playing a key role, as well as the analysis of decoded communications from encrypted platforms. As part of the investigation, real estate valued at several million euros was seized. The case exposed the deep interconnectedness among segments of state institutions, private capital, and organized criminal structures, raising serious questions about institutional integrity and the rule of law as such in the country.⁹⁷

In the Republic of Serbia, for over a year, widespread protests have been taking place under the slogan “Corruption Kills,” with mass participation by citizens and a significant presence of students and university staff. The initial trigger for a broad anti-corruption movement was the tragedy in Novi Sad, where 16 people died after a canopy collapsed at the train station. Although formally classified as an infrastructure static collapse, the ensuing protests conveyed the message that such accidents are not “natural” or unintentional but may result from institutional failures, non-transparent contracts, weak construction oversight, and a culture of impunity. In this sense, the slogan that “corruption kills” served as a moral and political assessment of systemic weaknesses.

From a theoretical perspective, the thesis that corruption “kills” is based on the argument that the misuse of public resources has direct consequences

⁹⁶ Aleksandra Bogdani and Besar Likmeta, [“The Incinerator: How a Politically-Connected Albanian Built an Empire on Waste,”](#) Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), 28 September 2020.

⁹⁷ Corruption cases with social impact in the Western Balkans and Turkey, [Transparency International, January 2025.](#)

for the quality and safety of public infrastructure. When public procurement contracts are awarded without genuine competition, when supervision is merely formal, and when oversight is politically conditioned, there is a risk that substandard materials would be used, formal procedures would be shortened, and construction safety standards would be overlooked. Under such conditions, corruption is not only a financial drain on the budget but also a potential threat to human lives, as it happened.

Reports from the EU and Freedom House consistently indicate that Serbia is making limited progress in prosecuting high-level corruption, with weak final convictions and insufficient institutional autonomy. In this context, the question of accountability following the tragedy concerns not only technical failures but also a wide range of circumstances in which prevention and sanction mechanisms do not function.

Despite a strong civic call for accountability, progress has stalled, while senior government officials have for months accused protesters of orchestrating a so-called “color revolution” driven by external actors.

There are at least three ways that corruption “kills” from the standpoint of public policy. First, when infrastructure projects are carried out poorly or without adequate construction supervision, this has a direct impact. Second, indirectly, when money meant for investments in health, education, or security of public structure is misdirected or used inefficiently. Third, a society of cynicism and indifference is produced when people lose faith in institutions to protect them. In this society, accountability is seldom given to particular people.

The demonstrations turned a particular tragedy into a larger movement for institutional accountability as they extended from Novi Sad to Belgrade and other cities. The demands included systemic changes in public procurement, bolstering the prosecutor's office's independence, and guaranteeing transparency in significant infrastructure contracts, all of which went beyond merely assigning blame for the particular case. The demonstrations are an illustration of how a particular incident can trigger the “critical moment” that highlights the connection between public safety and corruption.

“The lack of political accountability in Serbia over the last ten years is the reason these protests have become so intense. The tragedy of the train station roof collapse was just too big for the general public to accept without taking serious action.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Dušan Spasojević, Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade – [“Why did the Novi Sad railway station accident trigger such large protests in Serbia?”](#) European Western Balkans. 14 February 2025.

“A number of tragedies and scandals for which no one has been held accountable have been causing public frustration for years. With the ruling party essentially assuming entire control of the state, we are seeing the total collapse of institutions. In the wake of this tragedy, these protests are an expression of pent-up discontent that has now erupted.” (Jelena Vasiljević, Serbian university professor.)

Two months after the Novi Sad tragedy, there was a nearly identical incident at the Pulse nightclub in Kochani, North Macedonia. The distinction is that 63 young people perished in this fire, which happened during a concert party and amid a joyful euphoria. Macedonian citizens responded similarly, saying things like “Either we move out, or we burn alive” and “We don't die from accidents; we die from high corruption.”⁹⁹

There was insufficient fire safety, the nightclub lacked an operating permit, while a stampede had blocked the building's only exit. Nearly every family in Kochani, a small town with about 30,000 residents, was impacted by the tragedy because emigration had been increasing in the years preceding it. However, because of the disaster's causes, which indicate egregious negligence toward the community, there has been widespread grief as well as deep dissatisfaction and defiance. Because corruption permeates all relevant ministries, management, inspection services, police officers, and competent authorities, the venue—which was previously used as a storage warehouse—was not properly adapted and made safe for hosting events. As a result, the causes are both systemic and individual.

For almost a year, the parents of the victims and their relatives have led the public demonstrations against the state and corruption in the “Kochani, 16 March 2025” case, despite the fact that the majority of Macedonian citizens were and still are deeply outraged. Strong institutional and government pledges were made in the wake of the catastrophic accident that those responsible would face justice. Court proceedings started on 19 November 2025, following several months of investigations and vigorous public campaigns by the state promising a big and fair trial. The trial was referred to as the “biggest trial” because of its size, the number of defendants (34 people and three legal entities), and the fact that it spanned the last 13 years.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ “Ambulance vehicles are scarce, and the healthcare system is appalling. The institutions have failed; they let children burn alive in a barn, burning the country's youth and future. We are praying for an ambulance to arrive because, rather than investing in healthcare, we are investing in politicians, their extravagant lifestyles, and their travel. Meanwhile, those who are meant to protect us and whom we voted for in the hopes of a better tomorrow are spending thousands of euros, the citizens' money, to fly in expensive planes.” Statements from public protests, reported in [“Sakam da kazham,” 18 March 2025.](#)

¹⁰⁰ “The 166-page formal indictment, several hundred proposed witnesses, and evidence listed in a 120-page list (CDs, photographs, expert reports, orders, minutes, invoices, licens-

The claim that “corruption kills” is not a rhetorical figure of speech but a factual observation in light of the outcome. Working in the public interest is no longer a driving force when institutions are subjugated or politically dependent and oversight is only formal.

These tragedies are just one instance of institutional structural corruption coming to life, a time when the abstract notion of “abuse of public office” takes on a tangible, terrible human toll.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Western Balkan countries' legal systems are founded on codified law, a distinct hierarchy of legal sources, equality before the law, institutional autonomy, a clear formal separation of powers, and the idea of legal certainty and legal predictability. They are officially part of the continental European (civil law) tradition. However, the degree of institutional development and the independence of the legal system have an impact on legal culture, which is not restricted to the existence of codified norms. The symbolic status of the judicial profession, or the standing of professionals in this field in relation to other hierarchical groups (politicians, businesspeople, and other higher-ranking individuals), is also a value-related factor.¹⁰¹

The judiciary in the Western Balkan countries is officially protected by constitutional guarantees of independence; their legal systems are largely in line with the European *acquis communautaire*, while they acknowledge the European Court of Human Rights' jurisdiction. Nonetheless, the law is applied selectively, the legal culture is individualized, while law institutions are heavily influenced by politics. This observation leads to the conclusion that there is a hybrid legal culture, or a transitional legal culture, where a large body of legislation is being developed and frequently modified to accommodate changing social processes in both national and international contexts.

es, and tickets for the tragic concert) are part of the puzzle surrounding the tragic event, which, starting today, will be brought to light in the large, modernly equipped courtroom located at the Idrizovo Prison in Skopje.” The very day they had been waiting for 248 days, [DW, 19 November 2025](#).

¹⁰¹ Posner claims that the institutionalized autonomy of the judiciary, a strong role for the professional legal elite, and a systematic reliance on abstract legal constructs (corporation, contract, subjective rights, and powers) are characteristics of Western legal culture. With the help of written language, doctrine, and expert interpretation, law serves as a rationalized set of regulations. The core system itself is marked by a high level of professionalism and elitism since judges, prosecutors, and attorneys enjoy a high status in society, both materially and symbolically. A lower degree of trust in institutions and the belief that the law is not independent from political and economic influences are indicative of the lower status of the judicial function and the ongoing consolidation of the professional culture in the Western Balkans. [Posner, Richard A. *Economic Analysis of Law*. 9th ed. New York: Wolters Kluwer, 2014.](#)

When we discuss legal culture, we are mainly talking about how people feel about the legal system based on their values, whether judges feel independent or whether institutions have similar views of their own autonomy. Legal culture basically deals with the legitimacy of laws and the scope of their normative power. A hybrid legal system is one that combines informal influences with a formally rational legal system as such.

The origins of legal culture can be found in history quite frequently. The Ottoman, continental European, and socialist legal systems and societies have all had an impact on the Western Balkans historically, but institutional autonomy has never been permanently stabilized. For instance, in the Ottoman system, judicial practices were influenced by social class affiliation, and the law was closely associated with political and religious authority. Strong party control over the judiciary during the socialist era left a historical legacy that shapes the idea of the law as an instrument of state power rather than an impartial arbiter.¹⁰²

The Western Balkans has a hybrid legal system where the inherited institutional and legal culture, which is still gradually changing, blends with new reform trends that are influenced by European norms. This transformative process is ongoing, and at the present moment, amid all the turmoil described above, there are also emerging signs of initial efforts by institutions to resist political influence and strengthen their own professional autonomy. Fundamentally, institutions' independence and impartiality are the outcome of a continuous professional struggle to protect integrity and the public interest rather than being imposed from the outside.

As is customary in this kind of analytical work, the document in question does not offer a distinct section with conclusions and recommendations. This is due to both substantive and methodological factors. The analysis itself already includes the conclusions and recommendations, which are derived directly from the arguments and empirical observations presented in the text. They would lose their context and analytical content if they were taken out and put in a different section, which would reduce their usefulness and explanatory value. As a result, this document provides contextual insights and action-oriented guidance that are naturally integrated into the analysis and the larger discussion of the institutional challenges involved in strengthening the rule of law in the Western Balkans region, as opposed to formally separated recommendations.

¹⁰² Ibid.