

# European Integration of Western Balkans: Current State, Challenges, and Experience for Ukraine

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# Table of contents

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Summary	4
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Current State of European Integration of Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia	5
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China Factor as Risk for European Integration of Western Balkans Countries	14
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Conclusions. Experience for Ukraine	16
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## Summary

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In relations with Western Balkans countries, the EU maintains a policy based on the belief that the prospect of European integration will stimulate reforms and become an important factor in strengthening regional security and reconciliation.

Russia's aggression became the impetus for accelerating European integration of Western Balkans countries. As of today, all Western Balkans countries that are not EU members, except for the partially recognized Kosovo, have candidate status.

At the same time, granting candidate country status to Ukraine and Moldova in 2022 created a discussion about competition with Western Balkans countries on the European integration track. Furthermore, in the new realities of international politics, the factor of economic cooperation with China is gaining increasing importance in the context of EU membership negotiations.

For Ukraine, the experience of Western Balkans' European integration is important because it creates a field for analyzing successful and, conversely, counterproductive practices in relations with the EU. Therefore, considering the challenges and threats relevant to Ukraine's European integration, this document analyzes the state of negotiations and main challenges of European integration for such countries as Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

# Current State of European Integration of Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia

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Serbia has been negotiating EU accession since 2014, but progress has effectively stalled at the current stage. As of mid-2025, Serbia has [opened](#) 22 out of 35 negotiating chapters (all chapters of clusters 1 and 4), but no new chapters have been opened for several years. At the end of last year, seven EU countries [opposed](#) opening cluster 3. "The main reasons for refusal cited by member states were Serbia's non-compliance with EU foreign policy and sanctions against Russia, Belgrade's unclear geopolitical orientation, problems in the rule of law sphere, as well as in relations with Pristina", stated the joint position of the Baltic countries, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Croatia. This position by a number of EU countries currently links Serbia's progress on the European integration track with the results of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, as well as the issue of compliance with EU policy regarding relations with Russia.

Montenegro is often characterized as a "frontrunner" among Western Balkans candidate countries. By mid-2023, Podgorica had opened all 33 negotiating chapters under the previous methodology. As of mid-2025, the country has seven closed chapters, with 26 still open. EU Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos [stated](#) that Montenegro "could complete negotiations by the end of 2026 or 2027", paving the way for membership as early as 2028. The Government of Montenegro also defines this date as a target.

North Macedonia's European integration path is considered one of the thorniest among Western Balkans countries. The country received candidate status back in 2005 but could not start negotiations for 15 years due to blocking by Greece, which demanded a name change. Only after the conclusion of the Prespa Agreement in 2018 and the country's renaming to "North Macedonia" did a chance for breakthrough appear. In March 2020, the EU decided to start negotiations. However, almost immediately a new obstacle emerged – Bulgaria imposed a veto, insisting on constitutional recognition of the Bulgarian minority and resolution of historical disputes. In July 2022, through French mediation, a compromise solution was reached: Skopje agreed to start negotiations and begin screening of EU acquis, but committed to amending the Constitution, recognizing Bulgarians as one of the state-forming nations. As of the end of 2023, the country [completed](#) screening of all six clusters of EU legislation, but no cluster has been opened yet because the parliament failed to adopt constitutional amendments. Moreover, in September 2024, Brussels made a [decision](#) to "decouple" the progress of North Macedonia and Albania, allowing Albania to move forward without Skopje.

## Serbia. Overview of Internal Political Situation

In 2025, Serbia continues to experience growing internal political tension. At the current stage, protest demonstrations have been ongoing since the end of 2024. The catalyst was the tragedy at the railway station in Novi Sad, when 15 people died as a result of a canopy collapse. Subsequently, the protests transformed into a nationwide campaign demanding early parliamentary elections, with their most characteristic feature being active participation of student organizations in the protest movement.

According to a Sprint Insight survey (July 2025), more than half of respondents (53,5%) believe that Serbia is moving in the wrong direction, while only 33,5% expressed optimism about the country's future. Also, data from various polls during the first half of 2025 record a [decline](#) in trust in the government and president, with their approval rating fluctuating between 30-35%. Thus, systemic fatigue from Aleksandar Vučić's 12-year rule unites a broad platform of political interest groups and parties. However, the opposition currently remains fragmented ideologically and organizationally, giving the current authorities grounds to count on retaining power after the next elections.

Today, the authorities manage to maintain a majority in parliament – the pro-presidential coalition led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) controls about 130 out of 250 mandates in the Assembly (Skupština), allowing them to block any votes of no confidence or legislative initiatives from the opposition. President Vučić de facto retains full control over the government, as evidenced by the controlled change of cabinet head in April of this year to Djuro Macut, considered a technocrat close to the president.

Local elections in two municipalities of the country: Kosjerić and Zaječar, held in June 2025, demonstrated negative [trends](#) for pro-government forces.

However, the current main strategy of the authorities regarding elections, as evidenced by Vučić's statements, is to postpone the issue until 2027. Thus, the authorities are [betting](#) on the positive resonance of the World Exhibition EXPO-2027, which will take place in Belgrade.

At the same time, the authorities have intensified administrative pressure on opposition institutions, media, and civil society organizations. In assessments by independent analysts, concerns about increasing autocratic tendencies in Vučić's rule are increasingly voiced. The authorities, for their part, accuse protesters of attempting a "coup" and attribute the organization of the opposition movement to "external forces".

## Obstacles to Serbia's European Integration

**Information threats.** Local media loyal to the authorities often portray the EU in a negative light, especially in cases where Brussels criticizes Belgrade. For example, European officials are accused of "interference" in Serbian affairs. Instead, overtly pro-Russian messages are widely disseminated: Russian state media (Sputnik Serbia, RT Balkan) operate freely in the Serbian information space, spreading pro-Kremlin narratives contrary to bans on their broadcasting in the EU.

President Vučić, while declaring continuation of European integration, often plays on feelings of national pride: in particular, he has repeatedly [stated](#) that he will not compromise "Serbia's key interests" for the sake of EU membership, hinting at unwillingness to compromise on Kosovo or relations with Russia.

According to a [survey](#) conducted by Eurobarometer (spring 2025), only 37% of Serbs express trust in the EU, while 57% do not trust its institutions. The most consistent Eurosceptics are predominantly nationalist and far-right forces that openly orient toward cooperation with Russia. Among them are the movement "Dveri" (leader Boško Obradović), the party "Zavetnici" (Milica Đurđević). However, more telling is the example of Aleksandar Vulin – a former high-ranking official and now parliamentary ally of SNS. With support from pro-Russian media, Vulin promotes an alternative to the EU through participation in BRICS, criticizes "EU values", and promotes initiatives incompatible with requirements for candidate countries (for example, his political force initiated a [bill](#) on "foreign agents"). Thus, anti-European rhetoric remains a tool of internal political manipulation, damaging the perception of the EU in Serbian society.

**Foreign policy.** Another problem is the inconsistency of Belgrade's foreign policy with criteria that the EU sets for candidate countries. At the end of 2024, Serbia's level of alignment with positions of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), according to the European Commission [report](#), remained unsatisfactory. Attempts to maintain economic ties with Russia and courtship with China have tangible consequences for Serbia's European integration process. In European Commission assessments for 2023-2024, it was determined that Serbia's progress in accession negotiations will depend on its readiness to demonstrate "strategic choice in favor of Europe" and, in particular, join sanctions against Russia.

Today, Serbia remains the only candidate country from the Western Balkans that has not aligned its sanctions policy with Brussels. In May 2025, the European Parliament ruled that negotiations with Serbia "should progress only if the country aligns with EU sanctions against Russia and makes significant progress in reforms, especially fundamental ones".

Recently, Serbian Minister of European Integration Nemanja Starović [stated](#) in an interview with Austria Press Agency (APA) that Serbia is ready to fully join sanctions against Russia "when Serbian EU membership becomes clearly visible". It is worth noting that this is not the first time a Serbian high-ranking official has publicly signaled Belgrade's readiness to change its approach to the sanctions issue. In 2023, Minister of Economy Rade Basta openly spoke in favor of joining EU sanctions.

In both cases, the ministers' statements were criticized by pro-Russian forces in Serbian politics. For Vučić, the issue of imposing sanctions is important in terms of maintaining the current configuration of power and electoral risks. Under these conditions, a change in Belgrade's position on imposing sanctions is unlikely. Thus, the topic of Serbia's non-alignment with sanctions against Russia will continue to restrain the country's European integration.

**Energy security.** On the issue of energy imports, Serbia effectively ignores Brussels' position on diversification. Belgrade is betting on maintaining access to Russian gas and oil. "TurkStream" provides the country with natural gas of Russian origin. At the same time, the Serbian government [plans](#) to conclude a new three-year agreement for gas supplies in the amount of 2.5 billion cubic meters per year. In addition, the key oil and gas company "Oil Industry of Serbia" (NIS) is approximately 56% owned by Gazprom and its oil division. It is expected that in the near future, to avoid US sanctions, Gazprom may [sell](#) 11,3% of NIS shares and allow the company to import oil from the US. However, this will not change the general trend – despite Russia's hybrid aggression against the EU, Russian companies continue to safely own oil fields and other assets in Serbia.

The Serbian government's intentions to resume imports of Russian oil are evidenced by recent [negotiations](#) by Serbia's Ministry of Energy with representatives of Hungary and Russia regarding pipeline construction. According to the country's Minister of mining and energy Dubravka Djedović Handanović, the design and technical documentation is at the final stage, and the start of work is expected in early 2026. It is envisaged that the new oil pipeline will connect the city of Novi Sad in Serbia with the receiving station of the Russian "Druzhba" pipeline located in Hungarian Százhalombatta. The project is designed for annual transit of up to 5 million tons of oil, and the new pipeline is planned to be put into operation in 2027.

**Judicial system.** Significant obstacles to Serbia's integration are concentrated in the judicial sphere. The 2024 European Commission report assessed Serbia's level of preparedness as "between initial and medium" in judicial reform, emphasizing problems with excessive political influence on judges and prosecutors.

The EU also draws Belgrade's attention to unfilled vacancies, merit-based selection procedures, pressure on judges and prosecutors, as well as delays in adopting the Law on the Judicial Academy. "Vacant positions in the Constitutional Court remain, and Serbia has not yet demonstrated genuine commitment to investigating and prosecuting war crimes". The European Commission [records](#) "ongoing challenges in ensuring judicial independence, including undue influence and political pressure".

At the same time, according to the European Commission's assessment, Serbia is between initial and medium levels of preparedness. It is noted that Serbia practices circumventing procurement rules through intergovernmental agreements and special laws. According to the EU assessment, exceptions in public procurement, often used to award contracts through intergovernmental agreements, distort competition and may be associated with large infrastructure projects involving non-European partners (primarily China).

**Security.** At the same time, the key condition remains the settlement of relations with Kosovo. The negotiating framework continues to apply, which [states](#) that: "The issue of normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo will be addressed in Chapter 35 "Other Issues" as a specific point that must be resolved at the beginning and throughout the accession negotiation process, and in duly justified cases in other relevant chapters".



The European Parliament [emphasized](#) that progress in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, which should culminate in "a legally binding agreement based on mutual recognition", is mandatory for Serbia's further progress. From the EU's side, the main requirement for Belgrade and Pristina is signing the Agreement on Normalization of Relations, the draft of which the parties agreed to in 2023.

## Montenegro. Overview of Internal Political Situation

As of mid-2025, Montenegro maintains a balance between pro-European and pro-Serbian internal political camps. The cabinet is headed by technocrat Miloško Spajić – leader of the movement "Europe Now!" (PES!), which positions itself as a reformist and pro-European force. To ensure a parliamentary majority, the election-winning party "Europe Now!" brought into the coalition the bloc "For the Future of Montenegro" – an alliance of several pro-Serbian parties, among which are many political forces with pro-Russian positions, including the former Democratic Front. The leader of the Democratic Front, Andrija Mandić, received the position of Speaker of the Assembly as part of coalition agreements.

Overall, as of summer 2025, Spajić's cabinet operates without permanent threat of a vote of no confidence. Consensus is maintained through appeals to economic problems, particularly programs to increase salaries and pensions.

At the same time, there remains a risk of possible withdrawal of "Europe Now!" partners from the coalition, opening the way to early elections. Contradictions between the parliamentary majority and current President Jakov Milatović are [evidenced](#) by the failed vote on the Constitutional Court judge candidacy. If debates around appointing judges to the country's Constitutional Court, which currently functions on the verge of quorum, drag on in time, this could become a factor of internal political crisis and slow down the dynamics of negotiations with the EU.

## Obstacles to Montenegro's European Integration

As of June 2024, Montenegro has closed 7 (science and research, education and culture, information society and media, entrepreneurship, etc.) out of 33 open chapters. The Montenegrin government plans to complete negotiations with the EU on all chapters by the end of 2026. Moreover, at the European Political Community summit in Copenhagen (October 2, 2025), Montenegro's Prime Minister [stated](#) an ambitious goal – to become the 28th EU member by 2028.

However, official reports from Montenegro's Ministry of European Affairs indicate that as of July this year, only 123 out of 190 planned EU accession commitments were fulfilled, i.e., 65%. Thus, the pace of implementation has significantly slowed compared to last year, when 92% of commitments were fulfilled during the analogous period. Accordingly, despite statements by government representatives and EU officials, deadlines for completing negotiations and EU accession may [prove](#) to be overestimated.

**Information threats.** A significant part of Montenegrin observers links the slowdown in pace to unsatisfactory quality of governance and even hidden sabotage by pro-Serbian forces (the bloc "For the Future of Montenegro" and successor parties of the former "Democratic Front"). Among political observers in Montenegro, warnings are expressed that President (Speaker) of the Parliament Mandić and his like-minded colleagues, including leader of the party "For the Future of Montenegro" Milan Knežević, may resort to sabotaging European integration-related decisions if necessary reforms contradict their views on developing Montenegro's relations with Serbia. Indeed, the pro-Serbian forces' program directly contradicts the official course: they advocate lifting sanctions against Russia, do not recognize Kosovo, deny the Srebrenica genocide, express respect for war criminals Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić convicted by International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague. These positions are dissonant with European values and EU recommendations.

In addition, the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has significant influence in Montenegro, also sometimes [retransmits](#) anti-European messages, claiming that Europe supposedly imposes "alien values".

As a result, society in Montenegro remains polarized. A significant part of citizens (especially ethnic Serbs, who constitute about 30% in the country) support closer ties with Belgrade and traditionally sympathize with Russia. Accordingly, European Commission [recommendations](#) concern the issue of external hybrid influences, emphasizing the need to counter foreign interference and spread of disinformation.

**Crisis in bilateral relations.** One of the new obstacles to Montenegro's European integration has been the aggravation of relations with Croatia. As is known, in previous stages Zagreb consistently helped Podgorica in the context of EU integration. However, in summer 2024, Croatia [declared](#) three members of Montenegrin leadership personae non gratae, accusing them of "systematic activity regarding violation of bilateral relations norms". The Croatian blacklist included Montenegrin Parliament Speaker Andrija Mandić, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksa Bečić, and one of the Democratic Front leaders, Member of Parliament Milan Knežević. The next step was sending Montenegro a document demanding resolution of all disputed bilateral issues: demarcation on the strategically important border peninsula of Prevlaka; return of the training ship "Jadran", which remained in Montenegro after the breakup of Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; payment of reparations for participation of Montenegrin citizens in the Yugoslav army's war against Croatia and compensation to Croats held in camps; full provision of rights to the Croatian national minority in Montenegro; abandonment of the practice of naming Montenegrin objects and streets after persons considered war criminals in Croatia. As a result, in December last year, Croatia blocked Montenegro's closing of negotiating chapter 31 (Common Foreign and Security Policy).

**Judicial system.** Montenegro's judicial system is assessed as moderately prepared. Tangible progress has been achieved thanks to a new strategic framework and amendments to laws on the Judicial Council and Prosecutor's Office. The European Commission calls for appointing a permanent President of the Supreme Court and other high-level officials through transparent procedures to ensure independence and

accountability. Additional [alignment](#) of the legal framework with EU standards – especially regarding composition and decision-making process in the Judicial Council – is crucial.

The European Commission and European Parliament also call for strengthening media freedom and protection of journalists from threats, insisting on investigation of attacks on media workers. In 2023, Montenegro adopted legislation partially aligned with the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive. However, in Brussels' opinion, additional steps are needed to guarantee editorial independence and transparency of media ownership.

### **North Macedonia. Overview of Internal Political Situation**

For North Macedonia, 2024-2025 have been a period of consolidation of power by national-conservative forces under VMRO-DPMNE ("The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity") and stagnation of the European integration process. The internal political atmosphere in the country is currently determined by a combination of two factors: high expectations of citizens regarding the fight against corruption and economic improvements promised by the government headed by VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski, and uncertainty regarding further steps in European integration.

After concluding the Prespa Agreement with Greece in 2018, the country changed its name and unblocked the path to NATO and the EU. However, a new obstacle soon arose on the path to the EU: Bulgaria's demands regarding recognition of the Bulgarian minority and certain historical interpretations. In 2022, through French mediation, a compromise was adopted: Bulgaria lifted the veto, and North Macedonia committed to amending the country's Constitution to include provisions about the Bulgarian national minority.

The previous government led by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) was ready to implement corresponding changes but did not have the necessary number of mandates in parliament for constitutional amendments. VMRO-DPMNE, which replaced the socialists in power, categorically [refused](#) to support the amendments, calling them "dictate" and "capitulation" to Sofia. The result of last year's elections indicates that voters gave preference to VMRO's program, hoping for a change in approaches to relations with Brussels after a protracted period of compromises and concessions related to changing the country's name and disputes with Bulgaria.

At the core of the current North Macedonian authorities' "compromise" approach lies the idea of obtaining from the EU and Bulgaria postponement of these changes until the moment of the country's direct EU accession. The EU and Sofia have already rejected such a proposal. However, the position of the European Council currently remains unchanged. Thus, the situation around opening clusters of negotiations regarding North Macedonia's EU membership is currently on pause.

Within internal discourse, the ruling party VMRO balances. On one hand, the country's authorities refrain from overtly confrontational rhetoric toward the European Union due

to the risk of losing membership prospects. Also, an important factor is the position of Albanian parties in the ruling coalition, which are not ready to put the European future at risk due to VMRO's unwillingness to amend the Constitution. On the other hand, the authorities court public opinion, declaring unacceptability of constitutional changes "under external dictate".

## Obstacles to North Macedonia's European Integration

**Information aspect.** In Macedonian society, support for European integration as a strategic goal has been maintained for a long time, but in recent years this consensus has faced the challenge of difficult compromises. According to various polls, 60 to 80% of Macedonians were against amending the Constitution under pressure from Sofia. At the same time, a number of political forces parasitize on this outrage, promoting the thesis that it is better to stop negotiations altogether than to go for "self-humiliation".

The most prominent Eurosceptic force is the party "Levica", which is represented in parliament with six parliamentary mandates. The party sharply criticizes the country's "Euro-Atlantic establishment" and particularly aggressively opposes "Bulgarian dictate". Tellingly, "Levica" maintains a pro-Russian position – opposes sanctions against Russia and aid to Ukraine.

The 2025 European Parliament resolution notes that North Macedonia has become a target of harmful operations of external origin. Russian and pro-Kremlin actors [use](#) Serbian-language tabloids and media to spread anti-European narratives.

**Assessment of negotiations status by the EU.** Regarding North Macedonia, Brussels maintains tactics of encouragement while simultaneously setting strict conditions. On one hand, the European Parliament and European Commission regularly express full support for Skopje in connection with alignment of foreign policy with EU position (including sanctions against Russia). Also, recognition of the use of Macedonian language in the negotiation procedure and translation of *acquis* had symbolic significance for Macedonian national identity.

On the other hand, Brussels firmly emphasizes: without constitutional amendments, no negotiating clusters will be opened. The EU also tries to soften the position, assuring North Macedonia that no new requirements will be added, and after adopting amendments, negotiations will "immediately and unconditionally" move forward.

**Judicial system and fight against corruption.** Adoption of a new judicial reform strategy and roadmap for chapter 23 was assessed positively by the EU, but the government's proposal to dissolve the Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils raised concerns about undermining judicial independence. Shortage of judges and prosecutors threatens the quality and efficiency of justice. The European Commission calls for adopting a new law on civil procedure, strengthening the Judicial Council, and ensuring functioning of an automated case management system.

In the report, the European Commission notes that North Macedonia is at a moderate level of preparedness in the field of prevention and fight against corruption and has not achieved significant progress. Recent amendments to the Criminal Code weakened the legal framework and allowed termination of high-level cases, as crimes such as abuse of official position in public procurement were excluded. The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC), formed in 2024, according to the EU position, must act independently and receive appropriate resources.

## China Factor as Risk for European Integration of Western Balkans Countries

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China's presence in the Western Balkans has become one of the main foreign policy challenges for the European integration of the region. Unlike Russia, which uses historical ties and political influence, Beijing operates through a geoeconomic strategy aimed at expanding trade and logistics routes to the EU, as the region's proximity to the EU makes it an attractive transport corridor.

From Beijing's perspective, Serbia is the key country in the region in the context of attracting Chinese investment. On July 1, 2024, the Free Trade Agreement between China and Serbia entered into force. Major projects involving China include modernization of the Belgrade-Budapest railway, acquisition of the Smederevo steel mill by Hesteel company, and investments by Zijin corporation in the Bor copper mine. These projects provide Serbia with infrastructure modernization but are based on interstate loans that increase state debt. However, critics claim that Chinese contracts circumvent EU procurement rules and contain provisions for arbitration in favor of Chinese courts.

The absence in the European Commission report on Montenegro of mentions of Chinese investments may indicate that Chinese projects are not currently viewed as a significant obstacle on the path to Podgorica's membership. However, considering previous experience (a Chinese loan for construction of the Bar-Boljare Highway in 2013 amounting to 670 million euros, which constituted 22% of the country's external debt) indicates that Montenegro should guarantee compliance of foreign investments with EU public procurement rules.

North Macedonia's cooperation with China is modest compared to neighbors. In a China-CEE Institute briefing, it was noted that North Macedonia remained passive and uninterested in cooperation with China, focusing instead on Euro-Atlantic integration. Chinese investments in the country are relatively small; participation is [limited](#) to small infrastructure and industrial initiatives.

Thus, while Chinese infrastructure enhances economic capacity and transport connectivity of the region, Beijing's approach often contradicts EU principles in areas of rule of law, public procurement, and environmental standards. According to Martens Centre research, over 70% of Chinese projects in the Balkans are concluded outside standard tender procedures, creating [risks](#) of non-transparency and corruption. In Serbia, violations of environmental norms are observed, and in the digital infrastructure sphere, participation of Huawei and related companies raises concerns about cybersecurity.

Thus, China's approach often contradicts requirements of chapters concerning judicial system, fundamental rights, and security. China-funded projects sometimes circumvent national procurement laws, give preference to Chinese companies, and undermine transparency and environmental standards.

## Conclusions. Experience for Ukraine

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In 2023, European enlargement policy faced contradictions that manifested when a number of states expressed concern about the supposed shift in EU focus on integration issues from Western Balkans countries to Ukraine and Moldova. In recent years, the notion has become established about hidden "competition" of new candidate countries with Western Balkans countries that have been in the negotiation process for over a decade.

However, such a statement is incorrect: stages of countries' progress differ significantly, and comparison should be made only in the context of coordinating efforts and joint pressure on EU institutions.

Western Balkans countries are at different stages of negotiations with the EU. Montenegro has fulfilled interim benchmarks for chapters 23 and 24 and received closing benchmarks, indicating approaching completion of the most complex chapters. Ukraine, meanwhile, has only completed official screening of legislation compliance with EU acquis and has not yet opened negotiating clusters, indicating significant lag compared to Montenegro.

Albania and North Macedonia are at a stage close to Ukraine – screening has been conducted, but the first cluster ("Fundamentals") has not been opened. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains limited by internal confrontation on the part of Republika Srpska leadership, making this experience less relevant for Ukraine.

Therefore, at this stage, it is advisable for Ukraine and Western Balkans countries to coordinate actions to strengthen joint negotiating leverage. The case of Hungary blocking opening of the first cluster for Ukraine is illustrative. The European Council is considering transition from unanimity to qualified majority voting when deciding on opening clusters. If adopted, this change will extend to other candidate states, transforming individual blocking into a joint pressure mechanism that stimulates reform of procedures in Brussels.

The optimal model should provide for synchronization of negotiating steps, not a race for speed. Forming packages of countries (for example, Ukraine-Moldova together with Albania and North Macedonia) can create a common framework for technical and political agreements, simplify negotiations, and strengthen candidates' positions.

Considering the above, Ukraine should take into account the following aspects from experience of European integration of Western Balkans:

- ▶ **Early settlement of bilateral conflicts.** North Macedonia's experience shows that historical or ethnic disputes must be resolved before opening clusters. Ukraine already faces similar risks: Hungary blocks negotiations using the minorities issue;



Poland may potentially set strict conditions within the framework of national memory, acceptance of which will be unacceptable for a significant part of Ukrainian society.

- ▶ **Maintaining internal consensus.** In North Macedonia, constitutional amendments became a political marker of society's division. For Ukraine, it is important to ensure societal support for reforms (even despite the possible unpopular nature of some changes) to avoid a "Georgian scenario" – actual freezing of European integration in exchange for reconciliation with Russia.
- ▶ **Transparency on the issue of separating Ukraine and Moldova's European integration.** Ukraine should insist on clear criteria and guarantees from the EU to avoid repeating Albania's situation, which in 2024 received permission to open the "Fundamentals" cluster while North Macedonia remained blocked.
- ▶ **Solidarity with candidate countries.** The success of Ukraine and Moldova is interrelated just as Albania and North Macedonia's. Coordination of positions and mutual support strengthen negotiating positions and prevent "decoupling" policy.
- ▶ **Reform of EU enlargement methodology.** The current model allows individual members to block decisions. The initiative to transition to qualified majority voting when opening clusters is a potential way out of this systemic "trap".
- ▶ **Rule of law and fight against corruption as basis of trust from the EU.** Western Balkans countries' experience demonstrates that lack of progress in judicial independence and fight against corruption directly slows down the negotiating track. Ukraine needs to maintain transparency in personnel selection, strengthen anti-corruption institutions, and guarantee real autonomy of judicial power and anti-corruption bodies.
- ▶ **Compliance with public procurement rules and European standards.** The experience of Serbia and Montenegro, which deviated from procurement norms for agreements with China, indicates the need for Ukraine to ensure full compatibility of procedures with EU law. The priority in relations with China should be alignment with EU policy in the security sphere, competitive tenders, transparency, and refusal of intergovernmental agreements outside the legal framework of the European Union.