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## **The Pace of EU Enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia**

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**MSc Political Science (International Organisation)**

**Master Thesis**

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**The Pace of EU Enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis aims to examine the pace of European Union enlargement towards two Western Balkan states, Montenegro and Serbia, focusing on the influence of political factors. The thesis will start with an introduction section aimed at providing contextual background of EU enlargement and Western Balkan region. Research question of this thesis is: "How political factors influence the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia?", and will be introduced in the introduction. Theoretical framework will be supported by Sandra Lavenex's theory of EU external governance, where emphasis will be placed on the concepts of cooperation and integration. Furthermore, based on theoretical framework, two hypotheses will be introduced. Methodologically, the study will adopt qualitative methods, primarily employing process tracing techniques through case analysis and comparative case analysis. The literature review will categorize insights collected from the literature in various themes, including political dynamics and geopolitical complexities, challenges confronting democratic governance, identity dynamics and state-nation relations. Results and analysis section will provide analysis and founded results. Ultimately, this research will aim to provide an understanding of the multifaceted dynamics of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia.

## **Introduction**

Since its creation in 1951 the European Union has experienced several waves of enlargement, the first enlargement happened in 1973 when the original six member countries expanded to nine. Nonetheless, since the last European Union enlargement when Croatia joined, no new country has become a member and the United Kingdom which was crucial actor in EU politics, withdrew from the Union.

It is hard to predict when the next enlargement will be and where, but is widely speculated that it will happen in the region of Western Balkans which has been a focal point for future EU enlargement. The term of Western Balkans, includes 6 countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. In 1999, the EU Council formed the Stabilisation and Association Process to cultivate stability and cooperation in the Western Balkans. Also in 1999, the Stability Pact was established with the goal of establishing and reinforcing peace and security in Sout-

Eastern Europe. (European Commission, n.d.) In 2008, the Stability Pact was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council. (European Parliament, n.d.)

The research question of my study is: "How political factors influence the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia? ". Once one country, today two independent states with some similarities but also with complete differences. This research will trace the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia from the EU Western Balkan Summit in Sofia in May 2018, where EU reaffirmed its commitment towards Western Balkans countries. (EU-Western Balkan Summit, n.d.) By examining the development after the Sofia Summit, this research aims to outline how political factors influenced on the pace of EU enlargement in relation to Montenegro and Serbia.

The acceleration of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia is impacted by political factors outlined in the Copenhagen criteria. Political factors are addressing stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. Progress in these areas decides the level of preparation of non-member states. (European Commission, n.d.)

Specifically, regarding the political factors this research will focus on domestic political dynamics related to the rule of democracy and law. These factors are chosen because they are fundamental components of the Copenhagen criteria which serve as framework for estimating candidate's country's readiness for EU accession.

Montenegro and Serbia need to demonstrate a strong dedication to democratic principles, transparent governance, effective rule of law and the protection of human rights. The stability and independence of democratic institutions secures fair governance and moreover cultivates cooperation with EU member states, additionally it contributes to the acceleration of enlargement process.

Academic relevance of this research question is comprehending the EU enlargement dynamics. Going in depth into political factors which are influencing EU enlargement, research can provide insights into the complexity of European integration, which contributes to academic discussions on regional integration and international relations. Secondly, by analyzing the specific cases of Montenegro and Serbia it can contribute to

the development of theories related to EU enlargement, integration processes and the impact of political factors on the process.

Regarding the structure, the thesis will be divided into six sections. It will start with an introduction, an overview of the research subject, research question and the significance of the study. Second section will be theoretical framework which will include concepts from EU external governance. Furthermore, the methodology section where will be explained why the paper employed qualitative methods, particularly process tracing through comparative case study and case analysis. Following, the literature review, relevant literature will be explained, also possible gaps in the literature will be discussed. Next, results and analysis where findings and their analysis will be presented. Moreover, conclusion with main findings and recommendations. Lastly, it will be provided a comprehensive list of references.

## **Theory**

### *Introduction*

In this chapter the theory of European Union external governance by Sandra Lavenex will be introduced. Lavenex (2004) defines EU's external governance as the extension of parts of the Union's *acquis* outside its borders. It rests on the idea that the EU's international presence extends to its influence on countries outside the Union and international affairs. (Lavenex, Schimmelfennig, 2009)

The main concepts of the theory of EU external governance can be summarized as cooperation, integration and the extension of EU rules beyond its borders. The aim is to integrate external environment into common system of rules which are reflecting the EU's attempt to extend its impact and norms outside its borders through cooperative and integrative mechanisms. (Lavenex, Schimmelfennig, 2009) Emphasizing integration and cooperation with the EU offers way to stability and prosperity for non-member states cultivating alignment with EU rules and standards. By deepening political ties with neighboring states, the Union promotes regional stability, economic development and rule of democracy, law and human rights.

Integration and cooperation are key concepts in the EU's external governance strategy, outlining its interactions with non-member states and internal processes. Integration,

signifies the deepening of political relations between EU states within the EU framework. It implies harmonization of law, policies and institutions to foster common policies, shared decision-making and single market. (Andersen, Sitter, 2006)

Cooperation entails collaborative efforts among the EU and non-member states to achieve common objectives, for instance economic development or security. (Lavenex, Schimmelfennig, 2009)

The concept of differentiated integration is pivotal to understand the EU external governance as it offers detailed insight into different levels of integration among EU member states (Andersen, Sitter, 2006). Similarly, differentiated cooperation between EU and third countries, is increasing through formal institutional arrangements and informal practices. (Amadio Viceré, Sus, 2023) Moreover differentiated cooperation and integration, addressed by Klose, Perot, and Temizisler (2023), discerns among differentiation cooperation and integration within the European Union as two subtypes of differentiation.

### *Discussion*

Inside integration marks the deepening integration between EU member states within the EU institutional framework. It involves aligning national policies, laws and institutions with EU standards and regulations to facilitate single market, foster political cohesion and improve cooperation across policy domains. (Klose, Perot, Temizisler 2023) Outside cooperation encompasses collaboration between the EU and non-member states outside EU's institutional framework. It includes diplomatic relations, partnership agreement, development assistance aiming to promote stability, prosperity and good governance beyond the EU's borders. (Lavenex, Öberg, 2023) While both, integration and cooperation operate differently, they are connected within the EU external governance framework. Cooperation with non-member states often serves as a channel for promoting integration goals by spreading EU norms and standards outside its borders, encouraging regional stability and promoting common interests at the international level. (Mugenzi, 2015)

The three modes of external governance distinguished by Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2009) are hierarchy, networks and markets. The significance of this distinction lies in ability of this modes to shape the interactions between EU and the

non-member states and thereby influence the effectiveness of external governance. These modes represent different institutional forms which act as opportunities and constraints on actors' modes of interaction.

The first mode, hierarchical governance in states is based on formalized relations of dominance and subordination, where legislation defines obligatory rules that are sanctioned in case of violation. In the context of the EU, the hierarchical model is related to the "Community method" where supranational laws are enforced and sanctioned by the European Court of Justice, while at the sectoral level they refer to precise and binding rules integrated into supranational law. In external relations, a hierarchical system, like the EEA, implies the formal sovereignty of non-EU members, but informally undermines the autonomy of third countries through binding influences and compliance with supranational rules. (Lavenex, Schimmelfenning, 2009)

Furthermore, network governance where actors are formally equal, allowing for mutual agreement and procedural interaction without hierarchical imposition. Unlike hierarchical systems, networks produce less constraining instruments and rely on negotiation and voluntary agreement rather than authoritative law. In the EU, network governance challenges Community method, particularly in policy areas lacking consensus, operating through decentralized institutions and promoting horizontal coordination. At the sectoral level, network governance fosters socialization, learning, and communication, enhancing the legitimacy and expansion of rules compared to hierarchical models. (Lavenex, Schimmelfenning, 2009)

The third mode is market governance, as a form of external governance implies competition between autonomous actors, independent of hierarchical alignment or networked coordination. In the EU, the principle of mutual recognition frees up regulatory dynamics in the single market, encouraging competition and voluntary approximation of legislation based on production and service standards. This approach also extends to relations with third countries, where the EU's influence derives from its presence and interdependence, encouraging adaptation without direct institutionalized mechanisms.

Three sets of factors according to Lavenex and Schimmelfenning (2009) are influencing EU external governance: institution, power and domestic structure. Authors argue that

institutionalist perspectives highlight the role of existing EU institutions in forming external governance, while power-based explanations emphasize EU resources and interdependence with third countries. Domestic structures of third countries can require the effectiveness of external governance initiatives.

Institutional factors relate to the role of existing EU institutions in forming external governance dynamics. These institutions would include the European Commission, the European Parliament, The Council of the EU and other bodies involved in formulating and implementing the EU policies towards non-member states. Since the external governance is formed by existing EU institutions, it provides the template for the externalization of EU policies, rules and modes of governance.

Power factors refer to the resources and capabilities available to EU in external relations. The modes and effectiveness of EU external governance are determined by EU's power and its interdependence with third countries and competing governance providers.

Domestic structure factors pertain to the political, economic and social conditions within non-member states that can impact the effectiveness of EU external governance initiatives. Domestic structure factors shape reception, implementation and sustainability of EU policies and reforms in non-member states, each factor playing a significant role in influencing the approach taken by EU in its external relations

I will be focusing on domestic structures, for analyzing the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia, this type of approach will provide an insight into internal dynamics and efforts which are shaping the way towards EU integration. Assessing the stability and effectiveness of political institutions, and the rule of law within case countries, offers key insights into their readiness and willingness to evolve for the EU membership and all the factors which are influencing on it. Comprehending the complexities among the domestic structures and external pressure can provide a nuanced understanding of the pace and factors which are influencing EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia.

Muygenzi (2015) and Lavenex (2011) offer valuable insights which enriches Sandra Lavenex's theory of European Union external governance. Muygenzi's emphasizes

sectoral dynamics and the role of domestic structures in third countries and underlines the complexity of factors shaping EU external governance efforts. Likewise, Lavenex's (2011) discussion on the differentiated nature of external governance, specifically in the context of the Western Balkans, enlightens the different strategies used by the EU based on geographic location. These perspectives complement Lavenex's theory of EU external governance as the extension of the EU's norms and influence outside its borders, providing a detailed understanding of the obstacles and opportunities ingrained in EU's external relations.

The three models of external governance presented by Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier (2004) offer valuable insights which complement Lavenex's theory of EU external governance. The first model, external incentives model, focuses on conditioning of states behavior by external rules and conditions set by entities such as European Union, it resonates with Lavenex's accent on the extension of EU norms and influence beyond its borders. Similarly, the social learning model, which underlines the role of values, identity and norms in shaping behavior aligns with Lavenex's theory of integrating external environments into a common system of rules reflective of EU norms. Furthermore, the lesson-driving model, pointing out the transfer of specific rules and management methods, contributes to understanding how EU external governance seeks to influence policy outcomes in neighboring states. By integrating these models, a comprehensive understanding of EU external governance is provided, pointing out the different mechanisms through which the EU extends its influence and norms outside its territory.

Niemann and Zaun (2023) critique the theory of EU external governance, suggesting that it overlooks unintended effects of some policies such as migration policies. They argue that while some policies receive significant attention, informal means of EU impact through migration governance and their potential impacts on migratory movements to the EU are not adequately addressed.

The theory of the European Union External governance sets different models and mechanisms through which the EU expands its rules, norms and policies outside its borders. (Mugenyzi, 2015) This theory is specifically relevant in comprehending the

complexities of EU enlargement and the factors which are influencing the pace of accession for states such as Montenegro and Serbia.

As already mentioned, the theory of EU external governance encompasses three different models which are applicable to the case countries, the external incentives model, the social learning model and the lesson-drawing model. Each of mentioned models offers insights into how the EU communicates with non-member states and forms their behavior in the context of EU enlargement.

In the specific context of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia, domestic political dynamics have a significant role in forming the pace and the path of enlargement. Stability of institutions which guarantee democracy, the rule of law and human rights as was stated in Copenhagen criteria are crucial factors that can accelerate process towards the end of enlargement. Conversely, political instability, corruption, refusal of reforms and internal conflicts may delay the integration progress.

### *Conclusion*

Causal mechanism on which the interaction between domestic politics, external EU governance mechanism and the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia based is multidimensional.

In alignment with the theory of the European Union external governance, my hypotheses are:

H1: "The pace of European Union enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia is influenced by domestic political dynamics, specifically the extent of reforms undertaken in areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures and media freedom. Moreover, the effectiveness of institutional structures in cultivating democratic governance and the rule of law plays a key role in advancing accession process."

H2: "Despite reform efforts undertaken in areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures and media freedom, the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia did not experience acceleration."

## **Methodology**

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will introduce methodology which will be employed in this research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research approach and explain the reasons behind it. The use of qualitative methods, specifically process tracing, case analysis, comparative case analysis is crucial in examining the complexities and dynamics within political factors which are influencing the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia.

I am tracing the pace of EU enlargement towards Serbia and Montenegro from the European Union Western Balkan Summit in Sofia, in May 2018. By taking this summit as a starting point of a research, it can display changes or continuity in the EU's enlargement policy towards Montenegro and Serbia. Tracing the acceleration of the enlargement process from the Sofia Summit enables to analyze impact of crucial policy measures, initiatives and commitments made by EU towards Montenegro and Serbia. Furthermore, after the Summit case countries and the EU suffered different political and changes, by starting the analysis from this timeframe, this research can examine how these changes impacted the pace of the enlargement.

The use of qualitative methods allows to examine the complexities of political factors. This research tries to provide the details which characterize the political factors which are influencing EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia,

The dependent variable in this research question is the pace of the European Union towards the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro and the independent variables are political factors.

Process tracing is analytical tool for outlining descriptive and causal inferences from evidences, often comprehended as part of temporal sequence of events of phenomena. (Collier, 2011) Process tracing involves a detailed analysis of temporal dynamics and causal linkages. Tracing the evolution of variables and events over time, process tracing explains the underlying mechanisms which are driving observed cases, (Bennett, Checkel, 2014)

Complementing the process tracing, case analysis presents a key role in qualitative methods, providing in-depth examination of two cases within their context. Case analysis alludes to a comprehensive exploration of both cases individual,

enabling identification of patterns, dynamics and contextual factors. By examining individual cases in detail, case analysis enables detailed insights. (Gerring, 2004)

Following up the case analysis, comparative case analysis offers a comparative view which discerns patterns and variations across cases. Comparative analysis facilitates the identification of similarities, varieties and underlying mechanism and thereby enhances the research. (Bartlett, Vavrus, 2017)

### *Discussion*

I am conducting process tracing, via case analysis and comparative analysis, firstly because the EU enlargement process is multidimensional. Process tracing method aims for detailed exploration of the sequence of events and causal mechanisms that contribute to the expansion process, by employing case analysis this research can look into specific circumstances which are surrounding the enlargement process towards Montenegro and Serbia. Furthermore, process tracing allows the identification of causal mechanisms which are guiding the pace of the enlargement. Through examination of data, this research can recognize key decisions and factors which have impact on the process. (Glaser, Laudael, 2019) Moreover, case analysis allows for a detailed comprehension of context-specific factors which are forming the enlargement process. Comparative case analysis improves robustness of the research by allowing for comparison between two case countries, Montenegro and Serbia. By looking into similarities and differences in their enlargement progress, research can identify patterns, trends and factors that contribute to variation in the pace of enlargements. Ultimately, by using process tracing, research can provide valuable insights for policymakers and EU institutions involved in the enlargement process.

I will use both primary and secondary sources for this research. Regarding primary sources, I will look for official documents, reports and data provided by the EU and case countries, additionally I will employ newspaper articles to keep up with latest developments. It can offer firsthand information, policy and legal context related to the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia. For secondary sources, i will analyze scholarly articles which are analyzing and interpreting primary sources. Scholarly articles can provide analytical perspectives, theoretical frameworks and interpretations of relevant events or data related to my research

I will employ sources in multiple languages, including Croatian, English, Montenegrin and Serbian. Sources in Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian provide access to local perspectives, insights and analysis that may not be explicitly stated in English-language sources. The sources in the language of the Balkan region allow for a deeper exploration of cultural context, regional dynamics and political discourses which are surrounding the enlargement process. It can capture the details of language and historical narratives that could not completely translate in English. Additionally, English language serves as a common language for scholarly communication and collaboration among scholars, regardless of their nationality. Moreover, English written sources allow to explore different range of perspectives and findings from scholars across the world.

### *Conclusion*

Through detailed analysis and interpretation, this research can provide evidence-based insights and eventually recommendations for improving the effectiveness of EU enlargement process towards Montenegro and Serbia.

## **Literature Review**

### *Introduction*

The pace of European Union enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia has been a subject of scholarly interest in recent year. This literature review will examine articles with arguments and empirical findings connected to the pace of the European Union enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia. By examining literature, this review will aim to provide insights into political factors which are shaping the enlargement process, its implications for European integration and identify possible gaps. Reviewed literature will be in English, Croatian and Serbian languages so that the multidimensionality of the issue can be covered.

Most of the reviewed literature refers to the Western Balkans, Serbia or Montenegro, and the subject of research is too broad or too specific. My research question is: "How political factors influence the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia?". Not a single scholar has dealt with the subject in a way that they examined both Montenegro and Serbia as case studies, as well political factors together.

### *Discussion*

I will group the literature based on theme that they are discussing. Firstly, an overview of the political dynamics and geopolitical complexities which affect the process of enlargement. The balance between European integration aspirations and external pressures from Russia and China is addressed by Popović and Todorović (2021).

Similarly, Soyaltin-Colella (2023) introduces the concept of "stabilocracy" to point out how stability concerns can undermine democratic principles, in this specific article in the context of EU accession and Chinese investments.

Furthermore, Panagiotou (2021) examines multidimensional impact of Russia in the region of the Western Balkans, highlighting the term of resurgence of Russian impact while analyzing its political, economic and soft power efforts strategies in the region. The article could benefit from further exploration of the impact on regional stability and democracy.

Moreover, Montenegro's foreign policy orientation towards European integration, opposing it to Russian interests in region is emphasized by Orlandić (2015). While Orlandić's analysis elucidates the Montenegro pro-European stance, it could overlook internal challenges and public opinion that shape foreign policy decisions.

On the other hand, Gasmi and Prlja (2022) analyze Montenegro's EU accession process from the perspective of European fatigue, criticizing the European Union for its vague timetable and institutional challenges which are imposed, while pointing out Montenegro's significant geopolitical role and the need to prevail the stereotypes about Balkan countries.

Schiop (2021) offers nuanced explanation of the negotiation chapters among Montenegro and the European Union, while also explaining the concept of Balkanism and Balkanization.

Likewise, Mladenov and Stahl (2014) examine Serbia's Europeanization process, emphasizing the puzzle of inconsistent responses to EU demands regarding historical legacies and conflicts. Their examination of Kosovo-Serbia relations and challenges imposed by EU's dual approach to state-building efforts contributes to understanding the political dimension of EU enlargement.

Moreover, Medović (2021) explains Serbia's issue of aligning its foreign policy with EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and complementing Russia and China, emphasizing the new accession methodology. In difference with other scholar literature, the article offers explanation of potential consequences of foreign policy alignment.

Mirel (2022) critically examines the influence of Serbian media and regimes, Serbian relations with Russia and China and long lasting challenges of establishing the rule of law in Montenegro. Moreover, it comments on the Russia-Ukraine war and the impact of it on the Western Balkans states.

Additionally, Džankić (2014) underscores concerns about civil society marginalization and the effectiveness of EU normative power in the region.

The impact of bilateral disputes on EU accession processes is discussed by Petrović and Wilson (2021), addressing EU's insistence on resolving such conflicts as a precondition for membership. While the article clarifies the complexities of regional diplomacy, it could develop the argument more by taking into consideration historical context and power dynamics which are shaping bilateral relations.

Conversely, Marković et al. (2021) highlight that historical and geopolitical factors are shaping public opinion regarding accession. The authors also emphasize Serbia's specific position because one of the negotiation chapter includes a mechanism for monitoring implemented agreements within the dialogue between Belgrade and Priština.

The concept of the Open Balkans initiative is provided by Reka (2021), explaining the complexities of the EU enlargement process for Western Balkans and the mentioned initiative among concerns of enlargement fatigue and the necessity for internal EU reform. The article could benefit of providing potential flaws of such alternatives and explanation of why some states decline it.

Secondly, the theme of challenges to democratic governance and stability. Džankić and Keil (2017) delve into one of nowadays biggest democratic challenges, the rise of populist governance in Montenegro. Authors emphasize connections between political power, ideology and crisis management. Moreover, authors highlight the role of clientelism, political narrative manipulation and historical grievances in shaping populist governments in region.

Pizi (2023) offers comparative view of Serbia and Montenegro, advantages and obstacles for both states. Author mostly concentrates on the hate speech legislation and the rule of law in Serbia and Montenegro, emphasizing their implications for the EU accession readiness. However, providing more specific guidance on potential strategies for improvement in this specific area could benefit.

Furthermore, challenges of EU enlargement and its effect on democratic governance are addressed by Economides (2020) and Dudley (2020). Economides employs the phenomenon of "democratic backsliding" and the resistance of candidate countries such as Montenegro and Serbia to implement EU requirements, prioritizing regional security over democratic values.

The gap in existing literature regarding challenges to democratic governance and stability is the lack of integration of the mentioned obstacles in order to provide a clear and comprehensive explanation.

Thirdly, the articles are grouped based on the theme of identity dynamics and state-nation relations. Keil and Stahl (2023) employ social constructivist approach to examine connection between statehood, nationhood and European integration in post Yugoslav-states. The article offers a profound understanding of identity politics, gap here is that it could provide more specific mechanism through which EU integration influences state-nation dynamics.

In similar way, Vlajković (2022) addresses the transformative power of European identity, as it became a catalyst for Serbia's state-building encompassing legal, political and social changes. Although article provides credible argument for redefining European identity, it could provide more tangible policy recommendations for enhancing Serbia's alignment with EU values.

Džankić et al. (2023) analyze the role of national identity in shaping foreign policy orientations and aspirations for EU accession in Montenegro and Serbia. The article's examination underscores the challenges faced by both countries in aligning their foreign policies with EU requirements due to identity dynamics and state-nation connections.

This concept resonates with the insights into the political aspect of EU enlargement in Western Balkans by Daskalovski (2017). Daskalovski's provides recommendations for

combating stereotypes and addressing challenges and also touches upon the Kosovo issue and its non-recognition by Serbia and some EU member states.

The critique of EU enlargement process is provided by Mišćević (2016). The article offers a critical assessment of EU's enlargement policy towards Balkan region while providing comparison with Croatia's accession. Mišćević highlights inconsistent EU demands and prolonged accession procedures. However, Mišćević article could explore alternative strategies and the provided critique could be subject to potential bias based on author's interpretation of enlargement policies.

### *Conclusion*

Notable gap which remains across reviewed literature is lack of integration of different dimensions of political factors. Although some articles provide valid perspectives on specific aspect, there is a need for more encompassing understanding on how different dimensions intertwine and influence the pace of enlargement. Moreover, no article has shown case studies of Montenegro and Serbia in specific enlargement period, particularly how the dynamic of the enlargement has evolved over specific time period. In great majority, scholar articles focus on general path of countries to the European Union membership, not specifying the certain period in time. Likewise, how the enlargement process evolved and changed, the case countries also changed. Moreover, European Institutions have also changed, neighboring relations improved, geopolitical situation is constantly changing, all of which affected the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia. To conclude, by taking in mind the multidimensionality of the enlargement process, I will try to bridge the gap by conducting encompassing analysis of different aspects, pointing out the complexity of European Union accession for Montenegro and Serbia.

Since the European enlargement was a burning topic and will be in the future, the scientific contribution to the scholar community is unquestionable. This research will address the existing gap by conducting a comprehensive and thorough analysis which aims to shed light on the political factors which are surrounding the enlargement process. By complementing existing scholar articles from different disciplines, this research will provide encompassing analysis and will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the process and bridge the gap in the existing scholar

work. The findings of this research can have direct policy relevance by informing policymakers in both case countries and the European Union about the effectiveness of certain aspects. By identifying best practices and areas for improvement, the research can contribute to more efficient allocation of EU funds and the design of enlargement mechanism. Research will identify common patterns or differences across cases, moreover, this study could provide wide insights into the dynamics of the EU enlargement, thus it can enhance the generalizability of findings and contribute to European studies. Furthermore, the research could encourage academic debates by challenging existing assumptions about the accession process. Moreover, research findings could be translated and treated as actionable policy recommendations, with identifying practical strategies to address the challenges identified in the enlargement process.

Examining the EU enlargement process with focus on Montenegro and Serbia fills a gap in scholarly literature, providing insights into the difficulties of accession journey for candidate countries. Comprehending the specific circumstances, challenges and opportunities which these countries faced contributes to a broader discussion on European integration and regional stability in the Balkan region.

## **Results and analysis**

### *Introduction*

This chapter will present findings regarding the pace of the European Union enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia, enlightening the influence of political factors.

The first hypothesis claims that the pace of EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia is closely linked with domestic political dynamics, specifically with the extent and efficacy of reforms in particular domains, such as judiciary independence, anti-corruption and media freedom. Moreover, it claims that effectiveness of institutional structures in cultivating democratic governance and the rule of law has important role in progression of accession process.

On the other hand, the second hypothesis claims also that the pace of EU enlargement towards case countries is connected to domestic political dynamics, but that even with

undertaken reforms, countries did not accelerated in enlargement progress because of persistent obstacles which they are facing.

Central to the analysis is the use of methodological framework, process tracing, case study and comparative case study.

Brief introduction to domestic dynamics in Montenegro. Since gaining independence from Serbia, the domestic political scene was dominated by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) guided by Milo Đukanović. Significant shift occurred in 2020 with the rise of opposition which was advocating for transparency, anti-corruption and closer ties with the West. This change led to political changes and challenges due to the long-standing rule of DPS, evident in the won of the opposition in parliamentary elections in 2020. (D'Urso, Vetrini, 2023)

In Serbia, main political figure is president Aleksandar Vučić, following prior role as Prime Minister. His presidency has been marked by concerns over the concentration of power, decrease of media freedom, allegations of authoritarian tendencies and close ties with Russia. Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) firmly holds power, dominating the political scene for years. (Lutovac, 2021)

Lastly, presentation of the Chapters and requirements from EU Acquis which candidate countries need to satisfy, which will be explored in this section. Chapter 23, Judiciary and Fundamental Right highlights the significance of fair and independent judiciary. Chapter 24, Justice, Freedom and Security addresses issues related to combating corruption. According to EU acquis, chapter 10, Information Society and Media, focuses on promoting the development of information society and media freedom. (European Commission, n.d.)

The concept of EU external governance will be visible in the upcoming discussion, particularly in EU reports on judiciary independence, anti-corruption and media freedom. The EC recommendations and reports reflect the EU influence on countries which are outside the Union, in order that they are shaping their National Strategies in alignment with EU.

The concepts of integration and cooperation is particularly noted in discussion of national strategies. Concept of integration, because national strategies aim to harmonize

law, policies and institutions to EU standards, cultivating common objectives. Furthermore, cooperation among EU and non-member countries is emphasized in discussion of objectives and measures in National Strategies, since both countries are collaborating with EU to achieve certain aims.

The hierarchical governance model is also discussed in the context of the EU's influence on Montenegro and Serbia, where non-member states comply their legal frameworks and institutional structures with EU standards.

Furthermore, external incentives model is visible, using the example of the EU standards which candidate countries are trying to reach. Likewise, social learning model is demonstrated in the emphasis of core values such as democracy, rule of law and human rights. Lastly, the lesson-driving model is indicated in aligning with specific European norms.

In the next sections, each hypothesis will be explained through mentioned methodology, which will confirm or deny the hypotheses, and also contribute with new insights into about influence of political factors on EU enlargement towards Montenegro and Serbia.

### *Discussion*

#### ***Montenegro***

##### *Judiciary Independence*

In the introduction of Strategy for Justice Reform 2024 - 2027 is noted that the previous Strategy for Justice Reform 2019 - 2022 has not achieved satisfying level of implementation. (Ministry of Justice of Montenegro, 2024)

To elaborate more, the Strategy 2019-2022 had three main strategic objectives, first one was strengthening the independence, impartiality and accountability of the judiciary, second, enhancing the efficiency of the judiciary system, third aligning the Montenegro's judiciary with European standards and practices.

Regarding judicial independence, several measures were presented in order to increase it. Firstly, strengthening the independence and professionalism of the judiciary through the implementation of the human resources planning system in the judiciary. Secondly, enhancing the professional and personnel capacities of the courts and related

institutions. Thirdly, strengthening the financial independence of the judiciary by enhancing the autonomy of the judicial bodies in budget planning. (Ministry of Justice of Montenegro, 2019)

The reason for the unsatisfactory realization of Strategy 2019-2022 is methodological failure in defining operational goals, activities and deadlines for realization. Additionally, the ineffectiveness of the monitoring mechanism had impact, with focus on the inadequate organisational structure and the lack of an early warning mechanism.

The Strategy for the Justice Reform 2024-2027 was set with the aim to ensure independence, professionalism and efficiency of the justice system, moreover to improve accessibility of justice, transparency and trust of the citizens into the judiciary. Three key strategic goals are foundation on which lies a number of operational measures which are planned to be executed to accomplish these goals.

The most important goal regarding this thesis is the first goal which is strengthening the independence, impartiality and responsibility of the judiciary, it implies changes in the normative framework to secure the independence of judicial system. This aim also includes the improvement of financial independence of the judiciary which is basic to ensure that judicial positions can perform their tasks without interference or corruption.

The second goal is improvement of professionalism and efficiency of judiciary and the third goal, improving accessibility to justice, transparency and trust in the judiciary.

In accordance with these goals, Montenegro brought several temporary measures such as the implementation of constitutional changes in alignment with the recommendations of the Venice Commission and European standards. (Ministry of Justice of Montenegro, 2024)

#### *European Commission report's*

According to EC in 2018, Montenegro took measures to decrease political influence on judiciary appointments, however, concerns continued about attempted interference. (EC, 2018)

Furthermore, in 2019, the government undertook an analysis of legislative impact, showing a commitment to reform, but challenges remain. (EC, 2019)

Despite legal frameworks in place, throughout 2020, political interference continued, and was visible by salary cuts for judiciary members and concerns in appointing officials. (EC, 2020)

Progress was evident in 2021 with some successful appointments, but still concerns about political influence and malversations in judicial benefits. (EC, 2021)

In 2022, reforms were in process to align with European standards, but gaps in implementation persisted, prolonging concerns over independence and over-concentration of power. Concerns increased in 2023, as reforms failed to address the problems. (EC 2022, EC 2023)

### *Analysis*

Strategy for 2019-2022 and Strategy for 2024-2027 have similar goals and primarily focus on strengthening independence, impartiality, accountability and transparency of judiciary, with addition that Strategy for 2019-2022 put emphasis on aligning with European standards. The realization of the Strategy for 2019-2022 was unsuccessful due to methodological failure and monitoring mechanism, which Strategy for 2024-2027 seeks to overcome. Despite Montenegro demonstrating commitment to reform, concerns such as political influence, malversation in judicial benefits and gaps in implementation were noted by EC likewise some progress, but no significant change in order to tackle with all obstacles occurred.

### *Corruption*

Secondly, the burning problem of Montenegro is corruption, as emphasized by Freedom House (2023) corruption is widely spread in Montenegro.

In 2019 a corruption scandal escalated, Montenegrin businessman published a video, showing him handing \$200 000 to the then-mayor of Podgorica to finance ruling party's campaign and was claiming that he provided money in similar amounts to the DPS. (Kajosevic, 2019).

More recently, in April 2024 Former Montenegrin Chief Special Prosecutor was arrested, together with former Assistant Director of the Police. (Visnjic, 2024)

Additionally, also in April 2024 the director of the Montenegro's Anti-Corruption Agency has been arrested for the abuse of the function. (Radio Free Europe, 2024)

National Strategy for the Fight Against Corruption 2024-2028 has three key objectives: strengthening independence, impartiality and accountability of the anti-corruption bodies, secondly, enhancing transparency, and, strengthening integrity and raising awareness about corruption. The aim of these objectives is to create a long-term and effective system for combating corruption, defining and strengthening control mechanism, contributing to the development of society and to European membership.

The Strategy points out the alignment with the obligations from the EU accession process. Moreover, it refers to the opinion of the European Commission and the relevance of the EU standards in strengthening independence, impartiality and accountability in the institutions involved in combating corruption. (Government of Montenegro, 2024)

According to Transparency International (2023), Montenegro's corruption index improved from score 45 in 2018, to 46 in 2023, meaning the lower score, the higher level of corruption.

#### *European Commission report's*

In 2018, the progress was noted in Montenegro with improvements in institutional capacity, but concerns about the independence of institutions remained. (EC, 2018)

In 2019, although some limited progress was made, corruption remained widespread, emphasizing the need for a more encompassing approach of the Anti-Corruption Agency. (EC, 2019)

In continuation, in 2020 limited progress was achieved, with issues regarding the agency's independence and effectiveness in fighting corruption. (EC, 2020)

Some improvements were seen in 2021, specifically in Anti-Corruption Agency's work and communication efforts. Regardless of it, challenges in Agency's independence and priority-setting remained, pointing out the need for more efforts. (EC, 2021)

In 2022, Montenegro reached limited progress, with development in prevention efforts and the Anti-Corruption Agency's work. Nonetheless, challenges in securing integrity and accountability remained. (EC, 2022)

According to EC, by 2023 limited progress was made in preventing corruption and investigating high-profile cases, challenges persisted in upgrading legislation and assuring a strict justice response. Overall, Montenegro's fight against corruption has made progress, but still continued efforts are needed. (EC, 2023)

### *Analysis*

National Strategy for 2024-2028 emphasizes alignment with EU obligations, which demonstrates Montenegro's firm commitment to EU and additionally focuses on three important key goals in order to create an effective system which can combat corruption. Limited progress was noted by EC from 2018 to 2023, but concerns remained about high-level corruption and work of Anti-Corruption Agency which three mentioned affairs confirm. In order to create a long-term and effective system for fighting corruption more efforts are necessary and effective and robust implementation of the National Strategy.

### *Media freedom*

Montenegro has more than 150 registered media, including five television stations with national frequencies, three dailies and one press agency. (Reporters Without Borders, 2023)

In 2018, two incidents occurred, first one in April when in front of the house of crime journalist, specialized in investigating corruption and organized crime, bomb exploded. A month later, in May, an attempted murder by shooting was on an investigative journalist, who was already a target of similar attack a few years ago. (Reporters Without Borders, 2023)

According to Reporters without borders (2023), Montenegro improved its media freedom index, moving up from 103 in 2018, to 39 out of 180 countries in 2023.

Montenegro's National Media Strategy for 2022-2026 has four objectives: improved quality of citizens' information and improved media literacy, strengthened editorial and

financial independence, ethics and professionalism of public broadcasters, improved environment for fair market operation of the media and improved framework for the work and position of employees in the media.

Alongside, financial independence, in the Strategy the problem of insufficiently developed self-regulation is mentioned as a long-term problem. The document admits the connection among state and the media, and often attempts of political influence and corruption in the form of different subsidies.

Due to increasing security of the media workers, in December 2021, the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code was adopted, which qualifies types of criminal acts which are endangering journalists. (Ministry of Public Administration of Montenegro, 2022)

#### *European Commission report's*

In 2018 and 2019, concerns were raised about political influence in media, polarization of media scene and unresolved cases of violence against journalists. (EC 2018, EC 2019)

By 2020, in spite of some legislative progress, involving reforms, issues remained including concerns over editorial independence. Moreover, the problem of disinformation contributed to societal polarization, specifically during electoral campaign. (EC 2020)

In 2021, limited progress was made with investigations in violence against journalist, and the government established a commission for monitoring these incidents. Nonetheless, full judicial follow-up on old cases remained missing, efforts are needed to decrease impact of disinformation and hate speech. (EC 2021)

Montenegro in 2022, achieved some level of preparation, with improvements in legal frameworks and sanctions for attacks on journalists. However, issues persisted in judicial follow-up and confronting disinformation. (EC 2022)

Likewise, in 2023 limited progress was visible, with prompt reactions to new cases of violence against journalists, but still inadequate judicial follow-up on previous cases. Efforts to complete media legislation and enhance media integrity were ongoing, but

challenges remained in political polarization and ensuring professional standards. (EC 2023)

### *Analysis*

Montenegro's strategy for 2022-2026 has four goals, moreover the strategy alone admits the link among state and media alongside the issue of financial independence and self-regulation problems, which demonstrates awareness and acceptance of working on these shortcomings. Example of the work on shortcomings is legislative changes. Issue which remains is violence against journalists, which mentioned examples prove. According to EC, concerns which remained throughout the years such as political influence, media polarization, poor judicial follow-up, violence against journalists, but however progress was noted.

### ***Serbia***

#### *Judiciary independence*

Serbian Strategy for the Development of the Judiciary 2020-2025 points out that the Strategy for Development of the Judiciary 2013-2018 faced a number of challenges and that one of the main shortcomings was strong impact of the legislative and executive power on the processes of election and dismissal of judicial officials, which led to absence of independence. Lack of implementation of reforms, insufficient focus on staff expertise and lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms marked the previous strategy for the development of the judiciary.

The Strategy for Judicial Reform 2020-2025 presents six goals that should result in changes. The first goal is strengthening autonomy and independence of the judiciary, which implies the removal of the influence of the legislative and executive power on the processes of election, promotion and termination of judges, public prosecutors and other members of the Court's institutions.

The second goal is to improve the impartiality and responsibility of the judiciary, third goal refers to the improvement of the expertise of the judiciary through the continuous training of employees of the Court's institutions. Furthermore, fourth goal is to improve the efficiency of the judiciary, which requires efficient management of the judicial system and rational use of resources.

The fifth goal is the development of e-courts, and the sixth goal is to improve the transparency and accessibility of the judiciary.

The realization of goal one, strengthening the autonomy and independence of the judiciary, requires the implementation of a series of measures. Some of them are: completion of the process of changing the Constitution, moreover harmonization of judicial laws and by-laws with new constitutional and legal solutions, consistent implementation and supervision, creating normative framework for further advancement. (Government of Serbia, 2020)

#### *European Commission report's*

In Serbia, 2018, issues about political influence increased, and judicial framework was criticized for its weakness to such pressures, additionally limited progress was made in constitutional reform efforts. (EC 2018)

Despite ongoing reform attempts, in 2019 Serbia's level of preparation remained modest, alongside with recommendations for more transparent judicial appointments. Furthermore, in 2020 delay in constitutional reform hindered progress, and pressure on judiciary continued. (EC 2019, EC 2020)

Until 2021, reform efforts have continued, with focus on enhancing judicial independence, although there were still concerns over inappropriate influence. In 2022, successful ratification of constitutional amendments marked turning point, but challenges continued to exist. (EC 2021, EC 2022)

Lastly, in 2023, the implementation of new legal framework displayed promise, through pressure on judiciary remained high. (EC 2023)

#### *Analysis*

Serbia's Strategy for 2020-2025 has six goals, five of them refer to strengthening impartiality, independence, expertise, efficiency and transparency. Measures to achieve these goals and ensure judicial independence include Constitution amendments, which emphasizes Serbia's commitment to European standards, harmonization of law and creating a normative framework for more advancement. Moreover, the Strategy aims to overcome obstacles which previous Strategy for 2013-2018 faced, such as inadequate

monitoring, ineffective implementation, which demonstrates awareness. Despite legislative progress and constitutional changes, Serbia's judiciary still faces challenges like political influence, as noted by European Commission reports from 2018-2023.

### *Corruption*

In last five years, two corruption affairs stood out in Serbia.

The first one in November 2019, related to high-level corruption. Illegal laboratory for the production of marijuana, was found on an agricultural property with more than 600 kilograms of marijuana. The owner of the property, Predrag Koluvića was suspected of being the leader of an organized criminal group.

In years prior to his fall, the mentioned estate was visited by number of politicians from the ruling party, furthermore, the president of Serbia took Koluvića to business forums in Russia. (Bogdanović, 2019)

The second affair is "Krušik affair", the public received an information that company which is associated with father of the Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs bought weapons from Krušik weapon factory at lower prices compared to the state company. (Manojlović, 2019)

The text of the Serbian National Strategy for the fight against corruption, is not available but various anti-corruption regulations, public policy documents, acts and recommendations are. This document, emphasizes key goals aimed at strengthening institutional integrity and improvement of public sector management. Accent is on internal and external coordination in the implementation of operational plans, as well as on the identification and addressing obstacles for effective anti-corruption efforts.

The goals of the strategy include improving and formalizing cooperation among state bodies, implementing specific actions when proving corrupt acts in alignment with legislation and providing specialized education and training for personnel. Furthermore, increasing the number of procedures and prosecutions connected to corruption, emphasizing high-level officials and easing the permanent confiscation of property benefits acquired through corrupt acts.

The strategy highlights the importance of revising previous strategies and action plans, together with an assessment of their level of implementation. Analysis of previous experiences in combating corruption identified sectors of special importance, as well as responsibilities that require a specific approach. (Serbian Ministry of Justice, 2023)

According to Transparency International (2023) Serbia's corruption index worsened in 2023, from score of 39 out of 100 in 2018 to 36 in 2023.

#### *European Commission report's*

In 2018, while legislative amendments shown a commitment to address corruption, delays in implementing crucial laws, such as the new law on Anti-Corruption Agency. By 2019, limited progress was recorded and some level of preparation, with the adoption of revised anti-corruption laws. (EC, 2018, EC 2019)

Operational steps were taken to strengthen independence of Anti-Corruption Agency in 2020, but a decrease in completion of high-level corruption cases and lack of prevention coordination mechanism emphasized ongoing problems. (EC 2020)

In 2021, some progress was acknowledged by international bodies, completion of high-level corruption cases decreased from previous years. (EC 2021)

By 2022, small improvements were observed in addressing recommendations and increases in addressing high-level corruption cases, but the need for more encompassing strategy and increased coordination remained. (EC 2022)

Lastly, in 2023, despite progress in implementing recommendations, obstacles remained in completion of high-level corruption cases and adopting a more comprehensive anti-corruption strategy. (EC 2023)

#### *Analysis*

Serbia experiences high-level corruption as demonstrated in two corruption affairs and its corruption index has worsened. This indicates that corruption issues are ingrained, and that implementation and enforcement of anti-corruption measures are necessary and currently are lacking. The measures to improve situation focus mostly on internal coordination among state bodies. According to EC some progress occurred from 2018 to 2023, but obstacles such as high-level corruption remained. Aligning with EU

standards, reducing political interference and improving transparency and accountability are crucial to effectively combat corruption and to satisfy EU norms.

### *Media freedom*

In Serbia, media market is fragmented with more than 2,500 media companies registered. (Reporters without borders, 2023)

In 2019, journalist was assaulted two days after he published photographs of the President's brother and controversial business person from Kosovo. Simultaneously, on Twitter a video clip appeared where that journalist, his reporting network, were referred to as traitors and foreign mercenaries. (Martinović, 2019)

According to Reporters without borders (2023), Serbia's media freedom index decreased as being ranked as 91 country in 2023 and in 2018 as 76 out of 180.

The National Strategy for the Development of The Public Information System 2020-2025 in the introductory section, admits shortcomings in previous regulation and its application.

Specific goals of National Strategy for 2020-2025 aim on enhancing safety, socio-economic conditions and professional standards for media workers, creating a fair media market protected from political influence, establishing functional and professional institutions which will have protection mechanisms against external pressures, plural and diverse media content and improving digital literacy. (Government of Serbia, 2020)

Furthermore, in 2022 the Regulatory Agency for Electronic Media issued four national frequencies for eight years, to media which support the ruling party. These televisions, among various themes, conduct campaigns against critical and investigative journalists, broadcast violent reality programs and some of them have regular guests such as convicted war criminals. (Petković, 2023)

Lately, controversy surrounds the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media adopted in November 2023. In accordance with the new laws, the state of Serbia - through the state telecommunications operator Telekom Serbia, will once again be able to legally and officially own the media. The press fears that these

laws will give the government indirect influence and control over the television market. (Petković, 2023)

#### *European Commission report's*

In 2018, regardless of some level of preparation, no progress was made and serious concerns were raised about the freedom of expression. (EC, 2018)

Situation continued in 2019, with verbal attacks on journalists and not appropriate measures to protect their rights. Even though media strategy was drafted, its implementation did not. (EC, 2019)

In 2020, regardless of media strategy, practical steps were not taken and cases of violence and intimidation against journalists continued, compromising the different political views in media. (EC, 2020)

Limited progress occurred in 2021, including the adoption of several measures related to the media strategy, but verbal attacks on journalists continued, cultivating dangerous environment. (EC, 2021)

Furthermore, in 2022 no progress was made, with delays in implementing national strategy and concerns over media pluralism. Additionally, the regulatory body's passive role during the elections emphasized issues in ensuring fair media coverage. (EC, 2022)

By 2023, despite some appropriate reactions to attacks on journalist, issues over hate speech, intimidation continued. Moreover, the legal framework limited journalists ability to report on criminal proceeding, increasing the challenges to freedom of expression. (EC, 2023)

#### *Analysis*

Regardless of adoption of National Strategy for 2020-2025, it's implementation has been slow. New laws in 2023 increased the government control over media further. Likewise, the corruption index, media freedom index significantly declined and EC reports emphasize concerns about freedom of expression and political influence over media. According to EC, no progress was made since 2021, moreover concerns increased and with the laws from 2023 have reached the peak. Attacks on journalists and the issue of national frequencies being granted only to pro-ruling party media

underline the constant obstacles in ensuring media freedom, demonstrating that even with new national strategy which is in alignment with EU standards, the progress of the state towards democratic governance and EU integration is questionable.

### ***Comparison***

#### *Judiciary independence*

The biggest obstacle which both countries experience is political influence. Montenegro's last National Strategy priorities strengthening independence, impartiality and responsibility of the judiciary with measures like constitutional change and improvement of financial independence. Likewise, Serbian Strategy aims to strengthen autonomy and independence of the judiciary with measures like change in Constitution, harmonization of laws. While both countries aspire to align their judicial systems with EU standards, their progress and challenges distinguishes. Montenegro's reform implementation has been slowed down by methodological failures and institutional crisis, resulting in limited progress. In contrast, Serbia has made notable progress in legislative reform to address undue influence, collecting positive evaluation from international bodies.

#### *Corruption*

Montenegro and Serbia fight with all-present corruption and their approaches to fight it varies. Montenegro in its National Strategy outlines goals such as strengthening independence, transparency and integrity within its institutions. With improvements recorded by Transparency International, still issues remain, EC emphasizes challenges and obstacles in implementing measures to combat corruption. On the other hand, Serbia's strategy focuses on cooperation among state bodies and increasing the number of completed cases for corrupt acts. However, Transparency International reports a significant decline in Serbia's corruption score. Even though both countries are struggling with corruption, specifically high-level corruption, Montenegro's strategy seems more aligned with European standards, highlighting importance of independence and transparency.

#### *Media freedom*

Both countries are facing obstacles regarding media freedom and political interference, regulatory issues and attacks on journalists. Montenegro, recorded improvement with increase in its media freedom index. Although, concerns still exist about political influence, polarization and poor judicial follow up of cases of violence against journalists. In its National Strategy, Montenegro seeks to address these problems with focusing on media quality, independence and professionalism. In Serbia, the decline in media freedom index is visible, with regulatory issues, attacks on journalists and political influence. Concerns were particularly raised about 2023 laws. The EC reports underline the need for both countries to address cases of violence against journalist, ensure effective law enforcement and protect the media freedom. While both countries have similar struggles, Montenegro seems to putting more effort which gave results in implementation of the Strategy which is visible in its media freedom index and EC reports.

### *Conclusion*

In judicial independence domain, it is evident that both countries are struggling with the same obstacles, mostly with political influence, but are demonstrating commitment to reform. Moreover, the measures to combat it are similar, both are changing Constitution in order to succeed. The biggest difference is in effectiveness of implementation these reforms, which Serbia does properly and Montenegro not.

Regarding, combating corruption, pattern of dealing with high-level corruption is visible, but approaches of countries differ. According to Transparency International, Montenegrin strategy demonstrated more success.

Again in domain of media freedom, patterns are visible in obstacles which countries are facing, political interference and attacks on journalists. However, in Montenegro the willingness for improvement is tangible although institution follow up is essential. On the other hand in Serbia, with newly adopted laws, media freedom declined.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, the pace of EU enlargement is influenced by domestic political dynamics, specifically in the domains of judiciary independence, anti-corruption measures and media freedom. The effectiveness and persistence of institutional structures in

promoting democratic governance and aligning with EU standards plays a pivotal role in progressing within accession process. Both countries face alike challenges, but made commitments to reforms.

Regarding second hypothesis, although reforms experienced persistent obstacles, the progress even though gradual is noted from European Commission. Reforms undertaken are influential and their effects have impact on the EU enlargement. Concrete example of it is Montenegro's Media Strategy and its positive impact of implemented reforms.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this research aimed to investigate how political factors influence the process of EU expansion towards Montenegro and Serbia. Observed through the prism of EU external governance by Sandra Lavenex, and using process tracing, case study and comparative, the findings were explained.

It is clearly visible from the example of harmonization and cooperation with the EU standards that the EU extends its influence beyond its borders, and how it influences the states and their internal dynamics.

Furthermore, regarding first hypothesis, it was explained and shown how domestic dynamics have an important role in EU accession and that they greatly influence it as political factor.

Additionally, concerning second hypothesis, it is demonstrated how with persistent obstacles, reforms are possible and the progress, whether positive or negative from the EU side is noted and can lead to acceleration in enlargement process.

Future research could examine the role of political factors in combination with some other factor such as regional geopolitics. Moreover, comparative analysis could be conducted over other potential candidates and provide insights about the generalizability of the study.

Recommendations would include improved cooperation and monitoring by external actors, as well as targeted support and technical assistance for candidate countries. To the candidate states, the recommendations would be to ensure commitment to reforms and preserve adaptability.

Ultimately, this research contributes to debates about European integration, regional integration and international relations. Moreover, to the future of the region of the Western Balkans and the influence of external actors in shaping the EU.

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