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Compliance and Resistance: Rule of Law Conditionalities in the Western Balkans under the 2020 EU Enlargement Methodology

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the 2020 EU Enlargement Methodology**

Abstract

This thesis investigates the factors influencing compliance with the European Union's rule of law conditionality among Western Balkan (WB) candidate countries under the 2020 revised enlargement methodology. Drawing on the External Incentives Model (EIM), it hypothesizes that compliance is best explained not solely by the incentive of EU membership but by the credibility of the EU's commitments. Most of all, the trust that progress will be fairly rewarded and not obstructed by geopolitical, bilateral, or institutional factors. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of six elite interviews with national diplomats involved in the EU enlargement process. The study compares Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, revealing that credibility is critical but not the sole driver of compliance. Adoption costs, administrative capacity, and domestic political conditions also influence outcomes, varying by country. The findings contribute to the literature by refining the EIM framework and highlighting the importance of tailoring EU strategies to domestic contexts. The thesis concludes that credible EU commitments must be paired with domestic capacity-building and clear, enforceable conditions to promote rule of law reforms effectively.

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) enlargement process for the Western Balkans (WB) has been ongoing since the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit (Bojović & Ćorić, 2023, p. 41). Following the successful 2004 enlargement cycle, expectations were high that the WB countries would follow the path of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Nonetheless, the anticipated democratic transformation and rule of law progress have primarily fallen short (Zweers et al., 2022, p. 10). These countries have experienced slow transitions with limited reform. Recognizing this stagnation, the EU revised its accession policies, acknowledging that the approach used in previous enlargement waves was unsuitable. This led to a continuous refinement of its enlargement strategy, emphasizing conditionality more, particularly in the area of the rule of law (Dimitrova, 2016, p. 1).

In 2020, the EU introduced a new accession methodology that prioritizes rule of law benchmarks before discussions in other policy areas can begin (Csaky, 2024, p. 2). Since then, the enlargement process has regained some momentum. Nonetheless, contrary to academic

expectations, the EU's stronger rule of law conditionality led to uneven progress across WB candidate countries: While Albania and Montenegro have shown promising improvements, Serbia and North Macedonia continue to lag behind (Csaky, 2024, p. 3). This research seeks to explain this puzzle by examining the reasons that drive or hinder compliance with the rule of law reforms beyond the mere incentive of membership. It will do so through a closer comparative look at the four WB countries participating in negotiations. Ultimately, the research also argues that while the new methodology and the prioritization of the rule of law are a positive approach, their effectiveness and compliance with them are context-dependent. The geopolitical as well as domestic environment of each candidate country, as well as the EU's communication and engagement strategies, also play a critical role in shaping compliance, beyond the ultimate goal of membership. Therefore, the following research question emerges:

What explains compliance with the EU rule of law conditionality among Western Balkan candidate countries, beyond the incentive of membership?

Understanding the dynamics that drive compliance with the rule of law conditions in the Western Balkans is crucial from a societal as well as an academic perspective.

Firstly, the societal relevance is that, similarly to previous enlargement rounds, the integration of the Western Balkans is influenced by geopolitical concerns, as the EU aims to establish stable, democratic states along its Eastern borders. EU member states have a vested interest in ensuring that their democratization mechanisms lead to meaningful reforms and full membership for these countries (Vachudova, 2019, p. 70). Additionally, the ongoing geopolitical situation with Russia's aggression in 2022 has shifted academic and policy focus toward Ukraine and Moldova's accession. However, neglecting the Western Balkans in these discussions is counterproductive, as enlargement negotiations are interconnected. For candidate countries to remain committed to reforms, they must view the process as equal in opportunity.

Secondly, from an academic perspective, EU conditionality and compliance have primarily been studied in the context of CEE countries after they joined the EU. As a result, there has been limited research on these dynamics in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the EU's new approach

to conditionality has not been thoroughly examined. This research aims to fill this gap by focusing on the EU's most recent conditionality framework in the context of the Western Balkans.

In the following research, a detailed literature review on the studies discussing the reasons for compliance with the rule of law criteria in WB countries will be covered first, followed by a theoretical framework to carve out the hypothesis based on the External Incentives Model theory. Next, the research design, more specifically, the qualitative interview methodology, will be discussed. Lastly, the presentation and analysis of the results will be addressed, followed by the conclusion.

Literature Review

The following section will critically review the current state of research on the EU rule of law conditionality and its relationship to candidate countries' compliance and identify the gap in the literature.

The EU's role as a transformative power during the 2004 enlargement cycle is widely recognized in the literature. Scholars such as Leonard (2005) and Vachudova (2005) argue that the credibility of EU conditionality, underpinned by the reward of membership and the EU's normative appeal, was sufficient to drive democratic reforms and rule of law compliance. This view suggests that the EU's norm-setting function, combined with a credible membership perspective, ensured strong compliance in Central and Eastern Europe. Similarly, Lenaerts (2020) emphasizes that the EU's commitment to liberal democratic values forms the backbone of conditionality, reinforcing the belief that candidate countries would naturally adhere to these principles once inside the Union (pp. 31-34). Vachudova (2005) also assumes that all candidate countries, viewing EU membership as a national interest, would be equally eager to meet the Union's demands (p. 92).

However, more recent research challenges these assumptions and questions whether the success of conditionality in the 2004 enlargement can be replicated in other contexts, particularly in the Western Balkans. A growing number of scholars argue that the credibility of the EU's

conditionality has weakened, even as the EU has increased its focus on rule of law reforms. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020) point to a credibility gap that undermines the effectiveness of conditionality in the region (p. 815). Dimitrova (2016) similarly finds that while the formal rewards of enlargement have remained the same, their perceived credibility has declined. This has led to inconsistent compliance patterns shaped more by external and domestic political factors than by EU leverage (pp. 16–18).

This has given rise to a more skeptical school of thought, which challenges the sufficiency of conditionality as an explanatory factor for compliance. Noutcheva (2009) argues that the EU's normative authority is weaker in the Western Balkans due to conflicting sovereignty claims and domestic legitimacy structures. In her view, many candidate countries frame EU demands as externally imposed, justifying partial, fake, or outright non-compliance (p. 1065). Bojović and Ćorić (2023) reinforce this critique by identifying internal EU inconsistencies as a key reason for weak compliance. They highlight some core limitations: ambiguity in the definition of the rule of law, leading to vague benchmarks, weak monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, and the infrequent use of sanctions relative to rewards (pp. 46-50). Building on this, Pech (2016) notes a persistent gap between the EU's internal governance practices and its external enlargement policies (pp. 14–15).

The theoretical debate on the drivers of compliance is best captured in the External Incentives Model (EIM), developed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) for the Eastern Enlargement round. This theory conceptualizes conditionality as a cost–benefit calculation. According to the model, governments are expected to comply only when the benefits (i.e., EU rewards) outweigh the political and economic costs of reform (pp. 12–17). In the Western Balkans, however, even high-stakes rewards such as EU membership fail to motivate compliance. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020) reaffirm this view in a later study focusing on this region, concluding that the credibility of the EU's rewards, not the magnitude of incentives, is the decisive condition for effective conditionality (p. 829). Yet, what remains contested is why credibility has eroded and how this interacts with broader structural forces.

More recently, a new line of scholarship has emphasized geopolitical factors as increasingly relevant in explaining compliance. Anghel and Jones (2024) argue that the Western Balkans have

never held strategic economic importance for the EU, and were often treated more as a risk to internal cohesion than as a priority for enlargement (p. 102). However, Russia's war in Ukraine has altered this dynamic, shifting the EU's priorities toward regional stability and political alignment as a geopolitical necessity. As a result, compliance is no longer just a function of conditionality, but also of political urgency and international competition. Anghel and Jones (2024) contend that enlargement has become a geopolitical tool, driven by strategic motivations rather than solely by merit-based assessments (pp. 109–111). This geopolitical turn has, paradoxically, led to greater flexibility in how compliance is interpreted and rewarded.

Taken together, the literature reveals a clear shift from earlier optimism about the EU's transformative power toward a more critical and contested view of conditionality. Scholars broadly agree that credibility matters, but they disagree on the sources of credibility loss and on whether conditionality can still function as an effective governance tool in light of growing geopolitical pressures. The traditional model assumes that credible, consistent, and norm-based conditionality leads to compliance, but newer research challenges this view, emphasizing inconsistent application, domestic political resistance, and external shocks as key intervening variables.

This review highlights a core puzzle: if conditionality is becoming stricter and more formalized, especially following the 2020 revised methodology, why has compliance with the rule of law reforms in the Western Balkans remained limited and uneven? The literature identifies credibility as central to this puzzle, but does not fully explain what conditions enable or undermine credibility in the current geopolitical context in the WB countries. By addressing this gap, this research investigates how the interplay of domestic politics, EU policy inconsistencies, and strategic interests affects compliance outcomes in the region.

Accordingly, the research asks:

What explains compliance with the EU rule of law conditionality among Western Balkan candidate countries, beyond the incentive of membership?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To address the puzzle and research question identified in the literature review, this section outlines the theoretical foundations of the study. It begins by unpacking the key concepts of the research question: the *EU rule of law conditionality* and *compliance* in the context of enlargement. This will be followed by an explanation of the main theory applied here: the External Incentives Model. Clarifying these concepts and theoretical assumptions provides the basis for developing the hypothesis that guides the analysis.

Firstly, *EU rule of law conditionality* consists of two key elements: the EU's definition of the *rule of law* and the *conditions* tied to enlargement. In the legal framework of the EU, the *rule of law* is referred to as a fluid concept that is not precisely defined in EU treaties (Nozar, 2012, p. 2). Rather, it is mostly reflected in general EU principles and values enshrined in the Treaty on European Union (TEU) (p. 2). More specifically, the Council defined the rule of law by setting specific benchmarks such as access to courts, fair trial rights, equality before the law, protection against arbitrary arrest, and freedom from inhumane treatment (Bojović & Ćorić, 2023, p. 44). Furthermore, *conditionality* for EU enlargement can be understood as “an exchange between the EU and a candidate country in which the EU offers the candidate a (realistic) prospect of EU membership if the candidate implements a wide range of (EU driven) domestic reforms” (Steunenberg & Dimitrova, 2007, p. 3). The EU demands reforms by framing itself as a club requiring candidates to adopt stable democracy, the rule of law, a functioning market economy, and the *acquis communautaire* (p. 3). The EU's most recent enlargement policy, namely the new methodology introduced in 2020, places the rule of law at the center of the accession process. In the new policy, Chapters 23 and 24, the “rule of law chapters,” focus on reforms in the judiciary, corruption, organized crime, and fundamental rights (European Commission, 2022). The new “fundamentals first” strategy dictates that these chapters be opened first and closed last, but only once the candidate countries have demonstrated substantial progress in complying with the required rule of law reforms (Csaky, 2024, p. 2).

Under the revised methodology introduced in 2020, candidates would be expected to show greater compliance with the rule of law conditions, as these are given special emphasis in the

process and are essential for making real progress toward membership. However, existing literature suggests that multiple other factors influence Western Balkan candidate countries' compliance, beyond the EU's stronger institutional focus on rule of law reforms and the incentive of membership.

Secondly, *compliance* in this context refers to the extent to which candidate countries implement the rule of law requirements necessary for advancing toward EU membership. As it is already present in the literature review, compliance is a rather multilayered process. The expected benefits of EU membership, such as economic growth, security, and political stability, motivate domestic reforms. However, governing elites must believe that accession is achievable, otherwise, there is little incentive to pursue challenging and costly changes (Steunenberg & Dimitrova, 2007, p. 3). In the EU membership bargaining process, both sides have incentives to deviate. Candidate governments may delay or symbolically implement reforms to avoid domestic backlash, while the EU might push for reforms without intending to offer full membership, prioritizing stability instead. This dynamic increases the risk of stalled negotiations and limits genuine reform progress (p. 3).

In this thesis, the External Incentives Model (EIM) will be applied as the main theoretical foundation. This model, developed by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005), theorizes that compliance is driven by how domestic elites in candidate countries assess the costs and benefits of reforms. Rather than being motivated solely by the prospect of EU membership and the enlargement rules, elites comply only if they perceive the benefits of reform to outweigh the costs (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020, pp. 816-818). A key factor in this calculation is the EU's credibility (p. 829). EU conditionality is often undermined by time-inconsistency: candidate countries must fulfill conditions before receiving any benefits (p. 817). The EU's credibility depends on its ability to both follow through on threats to withhold rewards and deliver promised benefits once conditions are met. The credibility of threats is stronger when the EU has little to gain from the membership of the given country and the candidate has few alternative options. However, weak internal support for enlargement within the EU can make promises less reliable. Credibility also suffers when the EU sends mixed messages or when other international actors offer similar rewards at lower costs (p. 817). If candidate countries question

whether the EU will enforce conditions or fulfill its promises due to political motivations, their incentive to implement reforms diminishes.

Although the EIM was originally developed for the 2004 enlargement of CEE countries, its assumptions were also tested in the 2020 accession context of the Western Balkan countries by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020). Based on empirical analysis, the authors found that the theory remains relevant beyond its initial context (p. 814). Moreover, as in previous enlargement rounds, the credibility of incentives continues to stand out as a key factor influencing compliance with conditionality (p. 829). Therefore, it is a reasoned and tested model to apply in this thesis when it comes to the case of the Western Balkans.

Nonetheless, like any theory, the EIM does have some limitations. For instance, the EIM model takes certain background conditions for granted due to the time it was developed (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020, p. 830). More specifically, during the 2004 enlargement cycle, neither EU membership nor the EU as an institution was subject to significant political contestation, either internationally or domestically. In contrast, the contemporary context has changed substantially: the EU's relevance is now increasingly questioned and politicized, not only in candidate countries but even within its own member states (p. 830). This shift is accompanied by a growing emphasis on identity politics, alternative norm sets and intensifying geopolitical competition over influence in the Western Balkans. While other theoretical approaches, such as norm diffusion, can also help explain the dynamics of Europeanization, they do not fully capture the core mechanism this study investigates. Norm diffusion, for instance, conceptualizes Europeanization as the domestic impact of Europe, where both EU member states and candidate countries adjust their institutions in response to EU rules and norms (Börzel & Risse, 2012, p. 294). However, candidate countries are also exposed to competing normative influences from other geopolitical actors, such as Russia. This contestation of norms can slow down the enlargement process. Yet, it also highlights the central role of credibility: candidates are more likely to align with the actor whose commitments they find more trustworthy. Therefore, this study adopts the External Incentives Model, which places the credibility of EU commitments at the center of compliance.

The External Incentives Model (EIM) offers a framework for understanding how cost-benefit calculations influence compliance with EU conditionality, highlighting the conditions under which such conditionality tends to be less effective (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020, pp. 817–818). These conditions include the magnitude and accessibility of the rewards the EU offers, how clearly it defines the criteria for obtaining those rewards, the extent to which the EU's promises are seen as credible, and the political and economic costs that reforms impose on the target governments (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005, pp. 12–17). Focusing more specifically on credibility, the authors point to several factors that may hinder compliance among Western Balkan candidate countries. These include negative public sentiment in EU member states towards further enlargement, the growing likelihood of referendums on enlargement, internal disagreements and lack of cohesion within the EU, ongoing bilateral disputes between member states and candidate countries, and a declining commitment from the European Commission to the enlargement process (pp. 823–825). This study draws on these credibility-related indicators from the EIM to examine factors that may influence compliance. These will be assessed alongside elements of the EU's enlargement process, such as the revised methodology, to determine whether credibility concerns or the institutional design of the enlargement process play a more decisive role in driving or hindering compliance, beyond the mere incentive of membership.

The main argument of this thesis is that compliance with the accession criteria is influenced by factors beyond the mere prospect of EU membership. Based on the theoretical framework derived from the External Incentives Model (EIM), this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Compliance with rule of law conditionality in Western Balkan countries is better explained by factors related to the perceived credibility of the EU's promises (e.g., bilateral conflicts, unfavorable public opinion, EU internal coherence), rather than by the design of the enlargement process itself, such as the new methodology, which places greater emphasis on rule of law reforms.

In particular, the thesis proposes that compliance with the rule of law conditions, as outlined in the 2020 enlargement methodology, is not solely driven by stricter conditionality or the promise

of EU membership. Instead, it is more significantly influenced by the credibility of the EU's enlargement approach, including geopolitical motivations, bilateral issues, and domestic political attitudes towards the EU. These factors will be explored in detail through qualitative interviews, focusing on diplomats' perspectives, and operationalized through the factors mentioned in Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's (2020) EIM model.

Methodological Approach and Case Selection

This study examines the factors influencing compliance and non-compliance with the rule of law conditionalities in Western Balkan countries. To analyze this empirically, it focuses on the period from the introduction of the 2020 New Methodology until 2024. This policy is the most recent reform prioritizing the rule of law, making it an ideal case for examining compliance with these conditionalities. Given the complexity of factors shaping compliance, a qualitative analysis of elite interviews conducted with expert diplomats on enlargement is most suitable. This method is appropriate for conducting in-depth, theory-driven assessments of written materials (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 13).

For case selection, the study focuses on Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia. The rationale for this is that from the WB region, these countries are the ones currently actively engaged in the EU accession process under the revised methodology (Csaky, 2024). Additionally, these countries were selected as they represent a cross-section of the Western Balkans with varying levels of progress under the new methodology. The most recent 2024 enlargement report on democracy and the rule of law shows that Albania and Montenegro have made progress, while the other two countries have not (Csaky, 2024, p. 3). This allows for a comparative analysis of how different conditions and political contexts influence compliance. Furthermore, these countries have, for the first time, been included in the European Commission's 2024 Rule of Law Report. The 2024 Rule of Law Report qualitatively assesses developments in justice systems, anti-corruption efforts, media freedom, and institutional checks and balances across all Member States and enlargement countries (European Commission, 2024). To set the scene for the analysis of the interviews and present their current stage of the rule of law progress, an overview will be provided for each of these four countries based on the report.

To explain the presented progress to date and reasons behind compliance and non-compliance in these countries, this research will employ semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, each lasting about an hour, with national EU member state diplomats specializing in EU enlargement. According to Halperin and Heath (2020), interviews with political elites serve as a vital method for obtaining detailed and insider information on policy dynamics (p. 322). As Li (2022) highlights, elites play key roles in political, economic, and social domains, making interviews an essential method for identifying the underlying drivers of policy developments (p. 183).

To ensure a balanced range of perspectives among the 27 EU member state representatives involved in shaping enlargement policy, a structured selection strategy was used for the interviews. Six interviewees, representing almost one-quarter of the working group members responsible for enlargement, were chosen from six different EU member states: two from the founding members to provide an experienced perspective, two from the Cold War era enlargement group, and two from the Eastern enlargement wave to capture potentially more sympathetic viewpoints. Additionally, careful attention was given to selecting interviewees with at least 2-5 years of experience in the field of enlargement to ensure informed and credible insights. This diverse selection aims to offer firsthand perspectives on how domestic and external pressures influence compliance. The interview questions focus on the six diplomats' assessments of the EU's current enlargement toolkit, its impact on compliance, country-specific evaluations, and alternative explanations for compliance and progress. The interview guide is provided in the appendix. All participants gave informed verbal consent before participating in the study. The identity of the interviewees as well as the specific countries they represent will remain confidential to protect their privacy.

This thesis is based on primary data. On the one hand, notes were taken during interviews conducted throughout the internship project seminar. The interviewees will be national diplomats selected from the Working Party on Enlargement and Countries Negotiating Accession to the EU (COELA) at the Council of the EU. Given their influential roles, building long-term trust and maintaining strong relationships with elite participants is crucial for the study's success. Additionally, ensuring strict confidentiality and protecting the identities of participants is a key ethical consideration (Li, 2022, pp. 185–186). On the other hand, the Commission's Rule of Law Report of 2024 which is openly accessible on the EU's website.

Built upon the literature and theoretical framework, a coding frame has been developed to guide the analysis of the interviews. The operationalization will be based on the categories outlined in Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's (2020) study and the External Incentives Model (pp. 823-826). The coding frame consists of four main categories: the Size and Distance of the Rewards, the Determinacy of Conditions, the Credibility of Conditionality, Adoption Costs, as well as the Design of the Enlargement Process. Table 1, illustrating the coding frame, can be found in the appendix. A single, comprehensive, rich data table has been created to organize the data collected during the interviews. General information related to enlargement is shown in black, while details specific to the four countries are color-coded for clarity: red for Albania, blue for Montenegro, green for North Macedonia, and pink for Serbia.

For the analysis of the interview data, the information collected will be thematically coded using the predefined categories in the coding frame. The results will then be compared both across the four Western Balkan countries and across the six EU member states' perspectives. This comparison will help answer the research question by identifying patterns, similarities, or differences in the factors influencing compliance from both the candidate countries' and the member states' viewpoints. For example, raw data will be transformed into analytical categories in the following way:

INT-1 gave the following answer to a question related to why North Macedonia is stalling on its accession path: *“Motivation is lost as they are stuck with the opening of cluster 1 due to bilateral issues”* Here, the diplomat refers to Bulgaria's veto, which blocks North Macedonia's EU progress until it changes its constitution to include the Bulgarian minority (Constitution Net, 2024). This issue is not immediately related to the enlargement criteria, therefore, it is an example of the bilateralization of the accession process.

Looking at Table 1, the coding framework, bilateral disputes are specifically mentioned as an indicator for factors diminishing the credibility of conditionality in the eyes of candidates. Therefore, this quote will belong to the Credibility of Conditionality category, reducing the likelihood of compliance when it comes to North Macedonia.

Two possible criticisms must be addressed when it comes to the case selection and methodology: On the one hand, one might argue that due to the small sample size, the depth and scope of the research can be debated. On the other hand, it can be questioned whether compliance can be studied from the perspective of the enforcers (EU diplomats) and not the implementers (candidate countries) without epistemic bias.

Regarding the first issue, while the sample includes only six interviewees, they represent nearly one-quarter of all 27 EU member state delegations, a high proportion in elite research. These individuals are directly involved in decision-making and negotiations on enlargement, meaning their insights offer rare, high-quality access to the perspectives that actually shape policy outcomes. The study prioritizes analytical depth over statistical width, which aligns with the qualitative research design.

When it comes to the second criticism, it is indeed a valid concern, however, EU diplomats are the key actors in shaping and applying the conditionality that candidate countries must meet. Moreover, these diplomats are in regular, direct contact with their counterparts in the Western Balkans, such as ministers of EU affairs, giving them informed insight into the grievances, constraints, and reform challenges of candidate countries. Their perspectives, therefore, reflect both institutional priorities and on-the-ground realities. Importantly, these officials are not disinterested observers: in many cases, such as with the current Polish Council presidency in the first half of 2025, safeguarding the rule of law and EU enlargement is a clear political priority (Polish Presidency, 2025). Their intention is not to block or stall accession, but to support it, making EU perceptions of compliance all the more relevant to understanding why progress does or does not occur.

Overview of the Rule of Law in the Western Balkan Candidates

This section shortly presents the 2024 European Commission Rule of Law Report. This document provides a comprehensive assessment of Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia across four categories: the justice system, anti-corruption framework, media freedom, and institutional checks and balances (European Commission, 2024).

Overall, Albania has made notable progress regarding the rule of law, especially in judicial restructuring and vetting (European Commission, 2024b, pp. 2–3). However, transparency in appointments and judicial efficiency remain limited, while political influence and delays in case resolution persist (pp. 4–9). Anti-corruption institutions like SPAK show notable promise, though resource constraints, high public perception of corruption, and a recent amnesty law raise concern (pp. 10–14). Media pluralism suffers from ownership concentration, weak oversight, and threats against journalists (pp. 15–19). Moreover, institutional checks are hampered by low parliamentary oversight and limited civil society participation (pp. 20–24). Montenegro demonstrates relatively better progress, particularly in adopting new reform strategies, making it the most advanced among the four countries. Nonetheless, judicial appointments are delayed, and public trust in the judiciary is low (European Commission, 2024c, pp. 3–8). Corruption prosecutions lack final verdicts, media reforms are underway but unevenly implemented, and the Ombudsperson’s impact is weakened by limited follow-up (pp. 10–23).

North Macedonia’s reform efforts have been hindered by low public trust in judicial independence, non-transparent appointments, and weak implementation of anti-corruption laws, further aggravated by legal amendments that diminish accountability (European Commission, 2024d, pp. 2–16). Media independence faces pressure from state advertising and limited ownership transparency, while journalists continue to face threats despite improved safeguards (pp. 17–20). Institutional challenges include political polarization, underfunded oversight bodies, and inconsistent follow-up on Ombudsperson recommendations (pp. 21–24). Serbia has pursued constitutional changes to bolster judicial independence, but political pressure, vacant positions, and uneven implementation persist (European Commission, 2024e, pp. 2–6). Despite a mostly complete anti-corruption framework, gaps in enforcement, asset declaration verification, and high-level case outcomes remain (pp. 7–14). The media landscape is marked by insufficient

regulatory independence, biased reporting, and frequent legal harassment of journalists (pp. 15–18). Finally, ineffective parliamentary oversight, vacant court positions, and limited civil society space continue to constrain institutional accountability which makes the country the least advanced out of the four (pp. 20–23).

This section briefly presented the Commission’s assessment of candidate countries’ progress on rule of law conditionality. The next section turns to the perspectives of EU diplomats to provide a more nuanced understanding of why compliance occurs in some countries but not in others, going beyond the official narrative.

Results

The information collected through the semi-structured interviews have been organized into five analytical categories drawn from the External Incentives Model: (1) Size and Distance of the Rewards, (2) Determinacy of Conditions, (3) Credibility of Conditionality, (4) Adoption Costs and (5) Design of the Enlargement Process. Here, each category will be examined across the four WB cases using insights from the six EU member state diplomats.

A first look at the rich data (Appendix Table 3) as well as the matrix of results (Appendix Table 5) reveals various possible explanations for compliance with the rule of law conditionality, as indicated by the completeness of all sections of the table. This might suggest that all four countries are influenced similarly by a wide range of incentives and challenges when it comes to compliance beyond the prospect of EU membership. However, a closer examination shows that variations in domestic contexts and EU responses shape how and why compliance occurs or not in each case.

1. Size and Distance of the Rewards

This category refers to the perceived attractiveness and immediacy of EU rewards and their influence on compliance.

Only two diplomats made general remarks on this factor. INT-4 noted: “*Candidate countries have to have trust in the EU, it takes two to tango, and **if they do not get rewards on time, they will get demotivated***”. Similarly, INT-1 also sees immediate rewards as essential to keep the promise of enlargement real for candidates.

These insights suggest that the size and distance of the rewards have a mixed effect on compliance: when rewards are delivered promptly, they reinforce trust in the EU and incentivize reforms; when delayed, they can reduce motivation.

2. *Determinacy of Conditions*

This category assesses how the clarity and specificity of the EU’s conditions influence candidate countries’ compliance.

Five out of the six diplomats made remarks related to this category, most of which were general rather than country-specific. INT-1, INT-2, and INT-4 highlighted that one of the main problems with the EU’s conditionality is that it is overly technical and intertwined: “*The enlargement process stalls when it focuses excessively on technical considerations, the rule of law should be an incentive, not a hindering block*” (INT-1). Furthermore, INT-2 noted a lack of clear consequences for non-compliance and argued that introducing enforcement mechanisms would be beneficial: “*Compliance would improve if the EU introduced stronger and more explicit consequences for non-compliance.*”

In contrast, INT-5 viewed the clarity of the process more positively, pointing to clear expectations communicated by member states: “*Candidates take the rule of law conditionality seriously, as member states hold them accountable.*” However, they also acknowledged that differing interpretations of democracy between the EU and candidate countries contribute to ambiguity, which ultimately affects compliance.

These insights suggest that the determinacy of conditions has limitations. Four diplomats (INT-1, INT-2, INT-4, and INT-6) indicated that unclear or overly technical expectations hinder compliance, while only one diplomat (INT-5) provided a more positive assessment.

3. *Credibility of Conditionality*

This category refers to candidate countries' confidence that the EU is both willing and capable of fulfilling its commitments. It also encompasses the extent to which this credibility is weakened by political obstacles, bilateral disputes, geopolitical factors, or inconsistencies within EU institutions. According to the External Incentives Model, credibility is expected to be the most comprehensive explanation for compliance.

Immediately out of the five categories, this is one of the most complete. All interviewees added information to it, and three of the four countries examined were explicitly mentioned.

When it comes to North Macedonia, the issue of stalling due to bilateral issues was raised by INT-1, INT-4, and INT-6. As INT-1 noted: *"Motivation is lost as they are stuck with the opening of cluster 1 due to bilateral issues (constitutional reform)"*. All diplomats agree that such conditions delay the country's enlargement process. However, INT-4 emphasized that as long as rewards remain clear, they can still motivate action. In contrast, Albania was described more positively. According to INT-3, the EU has been a credible partner, which has kept the country on track: *"If the EU delivers on its promises, they deliver reforms"*. The same diplomat argued that in the case of Montenegro, despite the country's commitment and willingness to implement reforms, progress remains limited due to a lack of political will from the EU: *"In the past ten years, they only closed 8 chapters, even though they deliver, it can still happen that they do not move forward due to political reasons"* (INT-3). Unlike in North Macedonia, where bilateral disputes delay progress despite motivation, Albania's path suggests that credible EU action leads directly to reforms. Meanwhile, Montenegro reveals that even sustained reform efforts may be insufficient if EU political will is lacking.

More generally, the following topics emerged during the interviews. Credibility-related hindrances to compliance are mostly of a political nature, according to INT-1, INT-3, and INT-6: *"The biggest obstacle preventing candidate countries from fully complying with EU rule of law standards are mostly of political nature"* (INT-6). Moreover, another factor slowing down enlargement is the internal issues of the EU, mentioned by INT-2, INT-4, and INT-5. According

to INT-2, the Commission is not taking a strong enough leading role and lacks consistency in preventing democratic backsliding among both candidate and member states. Additionally, INT-4 and INT-5 see the problem as lying with the member states themselves: “*Member states must reflect on their own flaws and **resolve bilateral issues outside the enlargement framework***” (INT-4). What’s more, INT-5 argues that the stricter focus on the rule of law for candidates was driven by internal EU deficiencies: “*The introduction of the new methodology is not a surprise, it reacts to both **rule of law issues in candidate countries and similar concerns within the EU itself***” (INT-5).

Based on the interviews, several credibility-related drivers of compliance were identified by INT-3, INT-4, INT-5, and INT-6. These incentives are primarily rooted in the current geopolitical context, which has renewed momentum for enlargement. As INT-4 put it: “*The **renewed momentum for enlargement** may stem more from **geopolitical pressures like the invasion of Ukraine** than from the new methodology*” (INT-4). However, INT-5 argued that compliance in this context is often driven more by the urgency to gain EU membership than by a genuine interest in rule of law reforms. Moreover, geopolitics can also hinder compliance, especially when candidate countries perceive alternative partnerships as more attractive than the EU. For instance, by disinformation campaigns from third actors to diminish public trust in the EU, as noted by INT-4 and INT-6.

Overall, in line with the expectations of the External Incentives Model (EIM), this category has a mixed effect on compliance and offers a convincing and comprehensive explanation for both compliance and non-compliance.

4. Adoption Costs

This category concerns the political, institutional, and societal costs associated with implementing reforms in candidate countries, and whether these costs outweigh the perceived benefits, or the other way around.

Alongside credibility, adoption costs were among the most frequently mentioned factors influencing compliance; five out of six interviewees referred to them. Moreover, all four assessed

countries were described as facing adoption-related obstacles or domestic drivers on their path to EU accession.

In the case of North Macedonia, INT-2 attributes the lack of progress primarily to high-level corruption. INT-6 adds that capacity constraints are also a key issue: *“The independence of the judiciary and general administrative capacity need to be improved as well as the fight against corruption. Track record has worsened and the Prosecutor's Office and State Audit Office are understaffed and both lack resources.”* Similarly, Montenegro faces capacity constraints due to understaffing, as noted by INT-2, combined with an unstable governing majority highlighted by INT-1. Nonetheless, the country's strong political will to Europeanization balances capacity issues according to INT-6: *“There are still many aspects that need to be improved, but the existing political will and consensus should allow the reforms to be completed”*. In the case of Albania, a similar strong commitment to joining the EU can be observed, which, according to INT-5, helps offset other adoption-related costs: *“The country is committed to joining the EU, mainly thanks to the support of almost all parties”*. Despite a generally positive political environment toward the EU, Albania still faces considerable domestic adoption costs, particularly in areas such as media independence and the fight against corruption, as highlighted by INT-6 and INT-2. Moving on to Serbia, it appears to be the most affected by domestic adoption costs among the four countries, primarily due to its unstable political situation. According to INT-1 and INT-2, the main problem is political polarization as well as state capture by elites: *“A decade of power centralization has led to state capture, entrenched elites tied to organized crime, and minimal independent media”* (INT-2). INT-6 and INT-5 add that Serbia's stance on key democratic standards is being put to the test by the recent protests. Additionally, INT-5 notes that the *“EU methodology is only effective under stable, peaceful conditions”*, which is not the case in the country.

More broadly, the interplay between political will and actual administrative capacity was highlighted by both INT-4 and INT-6. As INT-4 noted: *“Member state support is key, as compliance often depends not just on political will, but also on administrative capacity and resources.”* This implies that the EU's support mechanisms for Western Balkan countries are essential; political will alone is not sufficient. Additionally, political will must come not only from leaders but also be reflected in their positive communication about EU accession to build

public support. As argued by INT-2 and INT-4, a critical civil society is also essential to drive reforms and foster European cultural norms.

To summarise, domestic adoption costs primarily explain constraints to compliance rather than acting as drivers. However, the findings suggest that political will and positive communication about the EU by political leaders can serve as important enablers of reform, as illustrated by the case of Albania. Contrary to the expectations of the EIM theory, adoption-related challenges, particularly those concerning institutional capacity and societal readiness, emerge as significant factors in shaping compliance, especially in terms of the obstacles identified during the interviews.

5. Design of the Enlargement Process

The final category entails the structural elements of the 2020 revised methodology and their role in compliance with the rule of law conditionality.

Five out of the six diplomats added information to this section. Only Albania was mentioned out of the candidates assessed.

When it comes to Albania, INT-2 as well as INT-6 noted that the new methodology directly contributed to the fight against corruption in the country: *“The mainstreaming of anti-corruption measures is a positive development thanks to the new methodology”* (INT-2). More broadly, INT-1, INT-3, and INT-6 noted that since 2020, the enlargement process has featured clearer expectations and stronger reform incentives, which have helped generate renewed momentum: *“Accession was stuck before, the new methodology has brought new momentum”* (INT-3). However, the impact of the new methodology is more evident in countries that began their accession process after its introduction, while the substance of the required reforms has remained largely unchanged (INT-2, INT-3). INT-5 observed that the new approach has particularly strengthened compliance in specific policy areas: *“The new methodology has somewhat strengthened compliance and democratization by promoting legislative reform and more transparent public procurement”*. Finally, INT-6 added that in the long run, making sure that the rule of law is in place for candidates reduces the risk of democratic backsliding after

accession: *“Prioritising fundamentals allows for better protection of the interests of the EU itself and reduces the risk that the Article 7 procedure of the Treaty on European Union will have to be triggered after accession”*.

Overall, all diplomats viewed the new methodology positively and agreed that it has contributed to improved compliance, particularly in the case of Albania. However, it does not fully explain compliance across all cases.

Table 5: Matrix of results

Categories of compliance (EIM condition)	INT-1	INT-2	INT-3	INT-4	INT-5	INT-6
Size and Distance of the Rewards	±			±		
Determinacy of Conditions	—	±		—	+	—
Credibility of Conditionality	± —	—	± + ±	± ±	±	±
Adoption Costs	— — —	± — — — —		±	+ —	± + — ±
Design of the Enlargement Process	+	± +	±		+	+ +

Legend

+	= driving compliance	Albania	= ●
±	= mixed effect on compliance	Montenegro	= ●
—	= constraining compliance	Serbia	= ●
		North Macedonia	= ●
		General	= ●

Analysis and Interpretation

Drawing on the interview findings, this section examines the hypothesis grounded in the External Incentives Model. According to this model, compliance with the EU's rule of law conditionality in Western Balkan candidate countries is primarily influenced by the credibility of the EU's commitments. It suggests that credibility matters more than other possible explanatory factors when it comes to compliance, therefore, that is the main answer to the research question: *What explains compliance with the EU rule of law conditionality among Western Balkan candidate countries, beyond the incentive of membership?*

The perspectives of EU diplomats gathered through semi-structured interviews suggest that the hypothesis can only be partially supported; credibility is not the complete answer to the research question. The weight of different factors, particularly adoption costs related to capacity issues, varies by country and depends heavily on context. The following analysis engages in a case-by-case dialogue between these findings and the theoretical expectations of the model.

True to EIM expectations, across the interviews, credibility consistently emerged as a key determinant of compliance. All diplomats asked have mentioned one of its components, such as bilateral disputes, geopolitics, public opinion, as well as internal coherence issues between EU institutions and member states. Additionally, credibility-related problems emerged in connection with all candidates under examination except in the case of Serbia. Several interviewees pointed to the politically charged nature of the accession negotiations and delays in rewards as causes for declining trust among candidates. An interesting observation emerges when examining the results matrix, Table 5. Credibility-related incentives tend to act more as drivers of compliance, or at least have a mixed effect, rather than serving as hindrances. This is particularly evident in the context of the geopolitical situation following Russia's aggression, which has generated new momentum for enlargement. This momentum appears to influence both the EU as an enforcer and the candidate countries as implementers.

Nonetheless, all interviewees, except one, emphasized capacity-related high adoption costs almost exclusively as a hindrance to compliance, as illustrated in Table 5. Based on the interviews, this category is relevant for all countries analyzed. Even if credibility is high, compliance cannot be achieved without the institutional, financial as well as administrative

means to implement reforms. This is where the limits of the credibility-centered argument of the EIM become clear: without adequate capacity, credible promises alone might not be sufficient. Tools such as the recently introduced Growth Plan for the Western Balkans were mentioned as a promising instrument to account for these resource issues, their effects are still to be seen (European Commission, 2023).

1. Country-Specific Factors

Another important implication of the analysis is that each candidate country faces a different set of challenges, suggesting that compliance is shaped by a combination of credibility, capacity, and other factors unique to each case. Generally, high adoption costs stalling compliance applied to all of them.

In Albania (highlighted in red), broad party support for EU integration has facilitated policy implementation. Additionally, the new methodology is perceived as credible, and since its introduction (despite reforms having started earlier), the country has increasingly mainstreamed anti-corruption measures. In Albania, both the credibility of EU commitments and domestic political alignment contribute to compliance. Therefore, in the case of Albania, the hypothesis is supported: despite hindering factors such as capacity limitations, the country continues to advance in its reforms, largely due to strong trust in the EU among both political elites and the public. The credibility of the new methodology also appears to contribute positively to compliance.

North Macedonia (highlighted in green) faces serious credibility issues. Bilateral disputes, especially over the constitutional change demanded by Bulgaria, have led to distrust in the EU's intentions. Additionally, limited capacity due to resource constraints makes reform implementation more difficult. Therefore, consistent with the hypothesis, progress in this country is hindered by a lack of trust in the EU, stemming from a bilateral demand, which reflects a credibility-related concern. However, high adoption costs also pose a significant obstacle to compliance.

Montenegro (highlighted in blue) primarily struggles with capacity-related adoption costs, such as limited human resources and a small administrative pool. However, the country remains

politically committed to EU integration. Strong public support and political support are helping to sustain reform efforts, allowing Montenegro to make the most progress. In this context, although the EU enjoys strong perceived credibility, reflected in sustained public and political support for accession, the country's limited administrative capacity continues to hinder full compliance with the rule of law conditionality. Despite being in accession negotiations for over a decade, progress has stalled primarily due to resource constraints. This suggests that while credibility is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient on its own to drive compliance, thereby highlighting the limitations of the External Incentives Model in fully accounting for the country's trajectory.

Serbia (highlighted in pink) exhibits the lowest level of compliance. The main barriers are political: domestic polarization, elite state capture, the shrinking space for civil society, and recent student protests have made reform implementation almost impossible. Serbia's domestic political and institutional conditions are not compatible with reform, indicating that the EIM's focus on credibility does not hold here either. While capacity issues in Montenegro are largely administrative, in Serbia, they are more ideological. The cost of reforms is politically high, as they would directly challenge elites whose legitimacy is already fragile. The instability of domestic governance, combined with limited democratic accountability, makes reform unlikely even in the presence of credible EU incentives. This underscores that credible EU commitments alone cannot explain compliance when domestic elites perceive reforms as a threat to their hold on power.

2. Member State Perspectives

Beyond candidate-specific challenges, member state perspectives also shape how compliance is interpreted and incentivized. Analyzing the perspectives of diplomats based on their country's own accession period provides further insight into how EU member states interpret and prioritize compliance conditions.

Founding EU member state representatives would typically be expected to uphold stricter standards when it comes to the rule of law. This was reflected in the interview with INT-2, who emphasized the importance of genuine commitment to the rule of law and criticized the European Commission's reports as overly optimistic. They advocated for stricter enforcement

and questioned whether candidate leaders truly want reform. In contrast, INT-1 was more optimistic, trusting the Commission's assessments and attributing stagnation to internal EU issues, including technical delays and bilateral blockages.

Countries joining during the Cold War are expected to support a more politically engaged, flexible approach to enlargement. This was largely confirmed by INT-3 and INT-4, who both called for a more proactive EU role, urging member states to resolve bilateral conflicts and advocating for faster integration tied to concrete rewards and capacity-building. INT-4 also highlighted the importance of empowering civil society and independent media to support reform.

Representatives of the Eastern Enlargement member states are assumed to prioritize geopolitical considerations over strict rule of law standards due to geographical proximity to the war in Ukraine and the changing geopolitical order. This pattern was mostly seen during INT-5 and INT-6, who both interpreted the renewed enlargement momentum as a response to the war in Ukraine rather than solely a genuine recommitment to democratic norms. INT-5 argued that compliance in candidate countries is largely driven by the perception that there is no viable alternative to the EU. Nonetheless, INT-6 stressed the importance of aligning with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) for candidates and maintaining public support to implement as many reforms as possible while the momentum lasts.

Taken together, the findings only partially support the hypothesis derived from the External Incentives Model. Credibility emerges as a necessary condition for compliance, nonetheless, it is not sufficient on its own. While credibility helps explain progress in countries like Albania and stalling in North Macedonia, other factors, such as administrative capacity and political adoption costs, are equally important. Montenegro demonstrates that even strong credibility cannot compensate for limited capacity. Serbia shows that unfavorable domestic political conditions can almost make EU credibility irrelevant, as the political costs of reform are simply too high to sustain compliance. Moreover, the differing viewpoints of member state diplomats, also shaped by the timing of their own accession, highlight internal fragmentation within the EU, suggesting that the Union does not always act as a unitary actor in the enlargement process. This also influences how conditionality is applied and how credible it appears to candidate countries.

Conclusion

To sum up, this thesis examined through expert interviews what explains compliance with the EU rule of law conditionality in four Western Balkan countries involved in the enlargement process from 2020 to the present, looking beyond the membership incentive alone. It sought to answer the research question: *What explains compliance with the EU rule of law conditionality among Western Balkan candidate countries, beyond the incentive of membership?*

This thesis draws on the External Incentives Model (EIM), which emphasizes the importance of credible EU commitments. It hypothesizes that compliance is mainly driven by candidates' trust that their progress will be fairly rewarded: credibility. This trust can be undermined by factors such as geopolitical interests or internal divisions within the EU. The analysis of the interviews confirms that while the credibility of EU commitments is a critical factor explaining compliance with rule of law conditionality, it is not sufficient on its own. Capacity constraints, domestic political conditions, and the specific nature of each country's challenges significantly influence outcomes. Moreover, the perspectives of EU member states and their own historical experiences with enlargement also shape how conditionality is interpreted and enforced.

Thus, compliance with the EU rule of law conditionality in the Western Balkans cannot be explained by a single factor of credibility. It results from the interaction of credible incentives, institutional capacity, and domestic political will, all of which vary across both candidate countries and the EU member states overseeing the process. Therefore, while this thesis partially confirms the External Incentives Model (EIM), it also highlights its limitations when applied to the post-2020 realities of the Western Balkans. These cases illustrate that the EIM is most effective when credibility aligns with domestic political will and sufficient administrative capacity. In its current form, the model underestimates how capacity constraints and elite resistance hinder reform. Consequently, this research calls for a revision of the EIM. Specifically, the model should be expanded to account for domestic adoption costs and internal EU divisions, as the EU does not always act as a unitary actor. Based on these insights, the EU should strengthen not only the credibility but also the coherence of its conditionality by aligning member states' messages on enlargement and providing more targeted capacity-building support

to candidate countries. Maintaining public and elite support for EU integration in the region will require both clearer communication and more consistent commitment from all EU actors.

Due to the small scope of this research, there are some limitations to the findings that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the study's main empirical part relied on only six expert interviews due to time constraints and primarily on member state perspectives. Therefore, future research should aim to include perspectives from all 27 member states' representatives' insights to get the full picture of the EU's national perspective on enlargement. Additionally, it should also include interviews conducted with candidate country representatives from WB countries to include their viewpoint as well on questions of compliance with the rule of law conditions.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature by offering a timely empirical update on rule of law compliance under the EU's revised 2020 enlargement methodology. It nuances the External Incentives Model by showing that while the credibility of EU commitments is crucial, it is insufficient without addressing adoption costs and domestic capacity. Through country-specific analysis and interviews with diplomats, the research highlights the differentiated nature of compliance across the Western Balkans. Moreover, it bridges political and administrative perspectives, which are often treated in isolation in enlargement scholarship.

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Appendix

Table 1: Coding framework

Categories of compliance (EIM condition)	Description	Indicators
Size and Distance of the Rewards	Perceived attractiveness and immediacy of EU rewards (e.g. accession, market access, funding)	Mentions of: • Delayed accession timeline • Lack of interim benefits • Rewards perceived as too distant
Determinacy of Conditions	Clarity and specificity of EU conditions for progress and compliance	Mentions of: • Ambiguity of criteria • Overly technical requirements • Lack of transparency in progress assessment
Credibility of Conditionality	Trust in the EU's willingness and ability to deliver on its promises	Mentions of: • Political blockage by member states • Incoherence among EU institutions • Referendums and vetoes • Bilateral disputes • Geopolitical selectivity
Adoption Costs	Political, institutional, and societal costs of implementing reforms	Mentions of: • Domestic political opposition • Polarization or lack of consensus • Institutional capacity limitations • Economic burdens
Design of the Enlargement Process	Structural elements of the 2020 revised methodology and their role in compliance	Mentions of: • Fundamentals First approach • Cluster structure vs. chapter-by-chapter • Improved monitoring tools • Incentive-based integration (gradual rewards)

Table 2: Interviewee guide/Primary sources

Interviewee code	Role	Country representation	Date of the interview	Consent received	Mode of interview
INT-1	Diplomat - COELA delegate	Founding EU member state	25/03/2025	Verbal agreement	Through the phone
INT-2	Diplomat - COELA delegate	Founding EU member state	21/03/2025	Verbal agreement	In person
INT-3	Diplomat - COELA delegate	Joined the EU during the Cold War	07/03/2025	Verbal agreement	In person
INT-4	Diplomat - COELA delegate	Joined the EU during the Cold War	11/03/2025	Verbal agreement	In person
INT-5	Diplomat - COELA delegate	Joined during the Eastern enlargement round	10/03/2025	Verbal agreement	In person
INT-6	Diplomat - COELA delegate	Joined during the Eastern enlargement round	08/05/2025	Verbal agreement	In writing

Table 3: Rich Data

Categories of compliance (EIM condition)	Description	Quotes
Size and Distance of the Rewards	Perceived attractiveness and immediacy of EU rewards (e.g. accession, market access, funding)	<i>"We need to reward progress immediately, that is the only way to make the enlargement real and credible"</i> (INT-1) <i>"Candidate countries have to have trust in the EU, it takes two to tango, and if they do not get rewards on time, they will get demotivated"</i> (INT-4).
Determinacy of Conditions	Clarity and specificity of EU conditions for progress and compliance	<i>"Enlargement process stalls when it focuses excessively on technical considerations, the rule of law should be an incentive, not a hindering block"</i> (INT-1) <i>"Compliance would improve if the EU introduced stronger and more explicit consequences for non-compliance"</i> (INT-2) <i>"Candidates do not take the rule of law conditionality seriously if it is not enforced, inherently, enlargement is a political process and cannot be treated just technically, it has to start at the top with the rule of law"</i> (INT-2) <i>"Since the new methodology was introduced, the process has become more intertwined, shortcomings in one chapter prevent moving forward with another one"</i> (INT-4) <i>"Candidates take the rule of law conditionality seriously, as member states hold them accountable"</i> (INT-5)

		<i>"The success of enlargement moving forward is largely dependent on the definition of democracy which might mean something different for candidates and the EU"</i> (INT-5) <i>"The current shape of the enlargement process, which requires multiple unanimities may lead to a substantively unjustified slowdown"</i> (INT-6)
Credibility of Conditionality	Trust in the EU's willingness and ability to deliver on its promises	<i>"Opening of clusters is easier, but the closing is politically charged"</i> (INT-1) <i>"Motivation is lost as they are stuck with the opening of cluster 1 due to bilateral issues (constitutional reform)"</i> (INT-1) <i>"Prioritizing the rule of law is an improvement, but caution is needed when used for purposes beyond rule of law concerns."</i> (INT-1) <i>"Conditionality is a lot of bark but no bite. The Commission should take on a more leading role so that democratic backsliding has consequences"</i> (INT-2) <i>"When the EU delivers, candidates deliver. When they genuinely want to progress, they try to show it, but implementation is tricky"</i> (INT-3)

		<i>"If the EU delivers on its promises, they deliver reforms"</i> (INT-3) <i>"Compliance is hindered by political motivations and the geopolitical situation"</i> (INT-3) <i>"In the past ten years, they only closed 8 chapters, even though they deliver, it can still happen that they do not move forward due to political reasons"</i> (INT-3) <i>"Disinformation from third actors trying to influence and build false narratives about the EU is an obstacle to compliance" (INT-4)</i> <i>"Bilateral issues require constitutional change, which for them can seem like an obstacle delaying progress, but the reward must be clear to motivate action"</i> (INT-4) <i>"The renewed momentum for enlargement may stem more from geopolitical pressures like the invasion of Ukraine than from the new methodology"</i> (INT-4) <i>"Member states must reflect on their own flaws and resolve bilateral issues outside the enlargement framework to prevent stalling the process and avoid candidates losing motivation or trust in the EU"</i> (INT-4) <i>"The renewed momentum for enlargement stems more from geopolitical shifts after the Ukraine war than from the new methodology"</i> (INT-5)
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		<i>“The introduction of the new methodology is not a surprise, it reacts to both rule of law issues in candidate countries and similar concerns within the EU itself”</i> (INT-5) <i>“It is not certain that candidate countries genuinely care about the rule of law, rather, there is no better option than EU membership in the current geopolitical situation”</i> (INT-5) <i>“The biggest obstacle preventing candidate countries from fully complying with EU rule of law standards are mostly of political nature”</i> (INT-6) “There is a strong political will among EU institutions and member states to advance enlargement, candidates should seize this momentum” (INT-6) “Countries must also fully align with the EU’s CFSP. Lack of alignment can undermine trust and delay progress, regardless of reform implementation in other sectors.” (INT-6) <i>“Protracted bilateral disputes have significantly hindered progress in the Western Balkans. Future candidates should proactively resolve outstanding bilateral or regional issues early in the process and establish mechanisms for durable solutions”</i> (INT-6)
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		<i>“One of the main challenges faced in the Western Balkans has been the fluctuating public support for EU integration, this underscores the importance of strategic, consistent, and transparent communication by candidate country governments” (INT-6)</i>
Adoption Costs	Political, institutional, and societal costs of implementing reforms	<i>“The main problem is political polarization, the parliament does not work, and there is no stable electoral cycle” (INT-1)</i> <i>“They show the most promise in adopting reforms, but progress is delayed due to a lack of parliamentary stability and a consistent governing majority” (INT-1)</i> <i>“Vetting of judges is very challenging because of vested interests” (INT-1)</i> <i>“Changing the legal system is easier and faster than changing cultural and structural patterns” (INT-2)</i> <i>“They have a good prosecutor, but convictions are not happening, as the rest of the system is not on board, which makes the judiciary slow” (INT-2)</i> <i>“Leaders in the Western Balkans only want to join on their own terms; they do not want to change the system completely” (INT-2)</i>

	<i>"Compliance is mainly hindered by institutional issues, but also the lack of political will by the ruling class to change them" (INT-2)</i> <i>"As the country is rather small, they encounter structural challenges, namely capacity issues, as it is difficult the change a system where everyone knows each other" (INT-2)</i> <i>"Domestic corruption is the main issue" (INT-2)</i> <i>"A decade of power centralization has led to state capture, entrenched elites tied to organized crime, and minimal independent media" (INT-2)</i> <i>"Progress is hindered by high-level corruption cases" (INT-2)</i> <i>"Candidates' commitment is shaped by their leaders' positive communication about EU accession and their efforts to build genuine reform momentum" (INT-4)</i> <i>"Without bottom-up pressure from society, government commitment to compliance and reform is weakened, civil society is crucial, especially in tackling corruption and judicial issues" (INT-4)</i> <i>"Member state support is key, as compliance often depends not just on political will, but also on administrative capacity and resources." (INT-4)</i>
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		<i>"The country is committed to joining the EU, mainly thanks to the support of almost all parties" (INT-5)</i> <i>"There are major domestic challenges, such as recent student protests, and the EU methodology is only effective under stable, peaceful conditions" (INT-5)</i> <i>"The impact of limited human resources capabilities also prevent compliance" (INT-6)</i> <i>"Despite many areas for improvement, such as media independence, Albania has achieved significant progress" (INT-6)</i> <i>"The ongoing protests test Serbia's approach to the fundamentals" (INT-6)</i> <i>"The independence of the judiciary and general administrative capacity need to be improved as well as the fight against corruption. Track record has worsened and the Prosecutor's Office and State Audit Office are understaffed and both lack resources." (INT-6)</i> <i>"There are still many aspects that need to be improved, but the existing political will and consensus should allow the reforms to be completed" (INT-6)</i> <i>"A stable economy and well-organised public administration are also essential in the accession process to the EU" (INT-6)</i>
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Design of the Enlargement Process	Structural elements of the 2020 revised methodology and their role in compliance	▼ <i>“The new methodology gives more pace to the enlargement process” (INT-1)</i> <i>“The mainstreaming of anti-corruption measures is a positive development thanks to the new methodology” (INT-2)</i> <i>“The impact of the new methodology is more pronounced in countries that started their EU integration process after its introduction” (INT-2)</i> <i>“Membership has become a more credible promise in the last couple of years” (INT-2)</i> <i>“Accession was stuck before, the new methodology has brought new momentum, but in reality, the substance of reforms has not changed” (INT-3)</i> <i>“The new methodology has somewhat strengthened compliance and democratization by promoting legislative reform and more transparent public procurement” (INT-5)</i> <i>“The revised methodology strengthens the role of fundamentals by improving the reforming power of the accession process in the most important field” (INT-6)</i>
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		<i>"Prioritising fundamentals allows for better protection of the interests of the EU itself and reduces the risk that the Article 7 procedure of the Treaty on European Union will have to be triggered after accession" (INT-6)</i> <i>"The focus on the fundamentals has improved compliance with the rule of law requirements" (INT-6)</i> <i>"Since the introduction of the new methodology, the establishment of Special AntiCorruption Structure (SPAK) is particularly noteworthy" (INT-6)</i> <i>"Further reforms to the enlargement process could be helpful, but the main goal, the accession can be also achieved based on the current methodology...The most pressing need at the moment is the full implementation of rule of law reforms by candidates" (INT-6)</i>
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Table 4: Color Codes

Country	Color
Albania	Red
Montenegro	Blue
North Macedonia	Green
Serbia	Pink

Table 5: Matrix of results

Categories of compliance (EIM condition)	INT-1	INT-2	INT-3	INT-4	INT-5	INT-6
Size and Distance of the Rewards	±			±		
Determinacy of Conditions	—	±		—	+	—
Credibility of Conditionality	± —	—	± + ±	± ±	±	±
Adoption Costs	— — —	± — — — —		±	+ —	± + — ±
Design of the Enlargement Process	+	± +	±		+	+ +

Legend

+ = driving compliance
 ± = mixed effect on compliance
 — = constraining compliance

Albania = ●
 Montenegro = ●
 Serbia = ●
 North Macedonia = ●
 General = ●