

April, 2026

# Regional Snapshot: Where Does the Region Stand in the EU's Cluster 1 – Fundamentals?





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April, 2026



## Contents

<b>1. Purpose of the Snapshot and Key Messages</b> .....	7
<b>2. Approach and Methodology</b> .....	8
<b>3. Understanding Cluster 1 – Specifically, Chapters 23 and 24</b> .....	9
<b>4. Regional Overview: Where Do Countries Stand Today</b> .....	10
<b>4.1. Regional Trend: Differentiated Progress with Common Challenges</b> .....	11
<b>4.2. The Position and Role of the EU in Providing a Clear Integration Approach</b> 13	
<b>4.3. Growth Plan</b> .....	15
<b>5. Key findings from the Workshops</b> .....	16
<b>5.1. Findings from the Workshop in Tirana</b> .....	17
<b>5.2. Findings from the Workshop in Prishtina</b> .....	18
<b>5.3. Findings from the Workshop in Skopje</b> .....	19
<b>6. Country-Specific Overview</b> .....	20
<b>6.1. Albania: From Reforms to Negotiations</b> .....	23
<b>6.2. North Macedonia: Adequate Framework, Moderate Progress</b> .....	24
<b>6.3. Kosovo: The Challenge of Institutional Functioning</b> .....	25
<b>6.4. Chapter 23: Comparison Across Countries in the Region</b> .....	26
<b>6.5. Chapter 24: Comparison Across Countries in the Region</b> .....	27
<b>7. Role of Civil Society</b> .....	28
<b>8. Recommendations</b> .....	29



## **1. Purpose of the Snapshot and Key Messages**

This snapshot aims to provide a concise, comparative and focused overview of the situation in selected Western Balkan countries within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, with a particular focus on Chapters 23 and 24, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reform. Through this approach, the snapshot seeks to identify the current position of Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo in the European integration process, highlight common challenges and differences among them, and shed light on the link between formal reforms and tangible results in practice.

At the same time, the snapshot aims to clarify that progress within Cluster 1 is not measured solely by the adoption of legislation or the formal establishment of an institutional framework, but above all by the effective functioning of institutions, implementation capacity, inter-institutional coordination, and the delivery of sustainable results in the rule of law. In this regard, the document seeks to provide not only a description of the current state of play, but also a regional reading of the main trends characterising the integration process in these areas.

## 2. Approach and Methodology

This snapshot is based on a regional and comparative approach, which enables a parallel analysis of developments in Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals. The analysis relies primarily on the European Commission's country reports as the main source for assessing the level of preparedness, progress and challenges in the areas covered by Cluster 1, including the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reform. In addition to these reports, other relevant documents of European Union institutions have been used, as well as materials presented and discussions held in the framework of regional workshops organised in Tirana, Pristina and Skopje.

The methodology combines qualitative document analysis with a comparative approach across countries. Substantively, the focus is placed on identifying key trends in Chapter 23, Chapter 24, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform, assessing not only the existence of the legal framework, but also the level of implementation, institutional functionality and the results achieved in practice. In this context, the analysis is structured to reflect both the differences between countries and the shared regional challenges.

As part of the methodological approach, findings from the regional workshops have been used to complement and contextualise the analysis based on official documents. These workshops have provided additional perspectives on how reforms are understood and implemented in practice, highlighting challenges related to accountability, institutional coordination, the functioning of institutions, and the role of civil society in the integration process. In this way, the snapshot combines document-based analysis with thematic discussions held at the regional level, with the aim of providing a more comprehensive and balanced overview of the current state of play and the main trends in the region.

### 3. Understanding Cluster 1 – Specifically, Chapters 23 and 24

Cluster 1 – Fundamentals constitute the core of the European integration process and goes beyond Chapters 23 and 24, encompassing a comprehensive assessment of the functioning of the state. In addition to the rule of law, which covers judicial independence, the fight against corruption, fundamental rights, security and migration—this cluster also includes the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration reform, economic criteria, as well as areas such as public procurement, statistics and financial control.

Within the enlargement methodology, Chapters 23 and 24 are opened first and closed last, as progress in these areas determines the credibility and pace of the overall accession process, reflecting not only the existence of a legal framework, but above all the state's actual capacity for implementation, coordination and effective functioning.

At the core of Cluster 1 are Chapter 23 and Chapter 24, which address the key dimensions of the rule of law.

➤ Chapter 23 focuses on:

- the functioning and independence of the judiciary,
- the fight against corruption,
- and the protection of fundamental rights.

This chapter is key to building credible institutions and ensuring equality before the law. In the regional context, the main challenges relate to the gap between the legal framework and its practical implementation, political influence, and the lack of tangible results in the fight against corruption.

➤ Chapter 24 covers:

- internal security,
- border management and migration,
- as well as police cooperation and the fight against organised crime.

This chapter is closely linked to the state's operational capacities and regional and international cooperation, and is particularly relevant in the context of the Western Balkans.

Beyond these chapters, the functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform constitute cross-cutting dimensions that directly affect performance across all other areas. Functional democratic institutions ensure a genuine separation of powers, effective oversight, and inclusive decision-making processes. At the same time, a professional and depoliticised public administration is essential for the implementation of reforms and for fulfilling the obligations arising from the integration process.

In this regard, regional experience shows that progress within Cluster 1 does not depend solely on the adoption of legislation, but above all on institutional capacity for implementation, coordination, and the sustainability of reforms.

## 4. Regional Overview: Where Do Countries Stand Today

Within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo demonstrate different levels of advancement, while sharing common challenges primarily related to the implementation of reforms and the lack of concrete results.

Albania is positioned as the most advanced among the three countries, having moved from the phase of building the legal and institutional framework towards consolidation and the delivery of results, particularly in the justice sector. However, even at this stage, challenges remain in ensuring the full functionality of institutions and deepening results in the fight against corruption.

North Macedonia is at an intermediate level, with a relatively consolidated legal framework, but limited progress due to weak implementation and political influence. This creates a clear gap between adopted reforms and the actual performance of institutions.

In comparison, Kosovo remains at an earlier stage, focused on capacity-building and legal and institutional consolidation. The main challenge lies in the lack of concrete results in the rule of law and limitations in administrative capacities.

Despite differing levels of progress, a common challenge across all countries remains the transformation of reforms from a formal level into measurable and sustainable results (track record), which is a key condition for advancement in the EU integration process.

Country	Level of Preparation	Progress	Key Characteristics
Albania	Moderately prepared	Some progress	Justice reform, increasing results, need for consolidation
North Macedonia	Moderately prepared	Limited progress	Solid legal framework, but weak implementation and political polarisation
Kosovo	Early stage	Limited progress	Capacity-building, lack of track record in corruption

**Table 1. Assessment of the Level of Preparedness and Progress According to European Commission Reports.**

## 4.1. Regional Trend: Differentiated Progress with Common Challenges

Based on the European Commission's country reports for Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia, the region is characterised by differentiated progress across countries, alongside shared structural challenges, particularly in the functioning of democratic institutions and the rule of law.

A key regional distinction can be observed between Albania and North Macedonia. Albania has made significant progress in the European integration process, having opened all negotiation chapters with the EU, placing it at a more advanced stage of alignment with the EU acquis. This progress was further consolidated in September 2024, when the European Union decided to decouple the integration paths of Albania and North Macedonia, thereby ending the "package approach" that had been in place since 2020. As a result, Albania has continued to move forward with the opening and advancement of negotiation chapters.

On the other hand, North Macedonia, which has been a candidate country since 2005, although for a long time considered the most advanced in the European integration process (a "front runner") in the region due to its early engagement in reforms and high alignment with the EU's foreign policy, continues to face stagnation in the integration process. Reports emphasize that, despite the opening of negotiations in 2022 and the completion of the screening<sup>1</sup> process at the end of 2023, the country remains in a state of blockage due to unresolved bilateral disputes, mainly with Bulgaria, as well as internal challenges such as political polarisation, a lack of consensus on key reforms, and delays in constitutional amendments directly linked to progress in negotiations.

As regards Kosovo, the findings indicate a lower level of progress across most indicators, particularly in the areas of the judiciary, fundamental rights and the fight against corruption, where assessments remain at the level of "limited progress" or "some progress". In this regard, the main challenges relate to the lack of tangible results in practice, weaknesses in inter-institutional coordination, and problems in the sustainable functioning of key institutions within the justice system. However, more positive assessments are noted in certain areas, such as the market economy and some elements of public administration, reflecting partial and uneven progress.

At the regional level, a common trend is political polarisation and the lack of cross-party cooperation, which continues to hinder progress. In Kosovo, the

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<sup>1</sup> The screening process is the initial technical phase of EU accession negotiations, during which the European Commission and the candidate country examine the 33 chapters of the acquis to assess the country's readiness to implement EU legislation. This process identifies legal gaps and sets the benchmarks for future negotiations. For more, see the document "What is the Screening Process and how does it work?", November 2022: [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a6f16348-cf71-4c99-af55-b58f977322ac\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a6f16348-cf71-4c99-af55-b58f977322ac_en)

lack of political consensus and parliamentary boycotts have directly affected the adoption of reforms, while in North Macedonia, polarization has impacted the functioning of the Parliament and delayed reforms. Recent reports also confirm that building political consensus remains key to advancing the integration process.

In the area of the rule of law, all three countries continue to face limited progress, particularly in the fight against corruption and in strengthening judicial independence. In Kosovo, progress remains limited and more effective implementation of legislation is required, while in North Macedonia corruption remains a serious concern and justice reforms have advanced slowly. In Albania, although some progress has been achieved through justice reform and the functioning of specialised institutions, the main challenge remains the consolidation of results and the establishment of a sustainable track record in prosecuting high-level corruption cases.

Another common element is the weakness of public administration and the implementation of reforms. In Kosovo, progress remains limited and effective implementation is often lacking, while in North Macedonia and Albania, despite more advanced legal frameworks, implementation remains partial and slow.

A further shared challenge is institutional capacity and the implementation of reforms. Even where a legal framework exists, as in the case of North Macedonia and Kosovo, implementation often remains partial and slow, limiting the real impact of reforms.

In conclusion, the region is characterized by uneven progress, where some countries advance more rapidly in the formal aspects of integration, while all face similar challenges in practice. Sustainable progress towards the EU requires not only procedural steps, but above all political consensus, stronger institutions, and effective implementation of reforms. The EU integration process no longer depends solely on technical reforms, but increasingly also on political factors, both within countries and in their relations with Member States.

Category	Albania	North Macedonia	Kosovo
<b>Overall Trend</b>	Gradual progress and consolidation	Relative stagnation with fluctuations	Limited progress or minimal progress
<b>Position in the Process</b>	Negotiations – all chapters opened	Negotiations – screening / blockage	Preparatory stage
<b>Key Political Developments</b>	By the end of 2025, all negotiation chapters opened	2024: EU decoupled the integration process from Albania due to blockages (Bulgaria)	2022: applied for candidate status; 2025: no response
<b>Key Challenges</b>	Need for tangible results and institutional consolidation	Political polarisation, bilateral conditionalities, weak implementation	Weak implementation, lack of track record, limited capacities

**Table 2 – Comparison of Progress and Challenges in the EU Integration Process**

## 4.2. The Position and Role of the EU in Providing a Clear Integration Approach

The European Union plays a central role in shaping the direction and standards of the integration process for the Western Balkan countries, through a structured framework based on clear and measurable criteria. In this context, the enlargement process provides a well-defined roadmap for reforms, particularly through Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, placing emphasis on the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reform.

From the perspective of recent years, the phenomenon of “enlargement fatigue” within the European Union has affected the clarity and predictability of the integration process. For an extended period, the enlargement process was characterised by what is commonly referred to as enlargement fatigue, whereby the EU prioritised internal institutional and political consolidation, often reflected in statements that deepening internal integration should precede enlargement.<sup>2</sup>

This phenomenon was particularly pronounced during the period 2010–2022. An illustrative example is Albania, which obtained candidate country status as early as 2014, but the decision to open accession negotiations was delayed until 2022, despite continuous progress in reforms. Similarly, North Macedonia, although long considered one of the most prepared countries for integration, has faced considerable delays due to internal EU dynamics and additional bilateral conditionalities. This approach has resulted in a degree of uncertainty and dissatisfaction in the region, contributing to growing scepticism towards

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, COM(2019) 260 final, Brussels, 29 May 2019; shih gjithashtu European Commission, Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, COM(2020) 57 final, Brussels, 5 February 2020.

the integration process, the strengthening of populist narratives, and increased resistance to the conditions and criteria set by the EU.<sup>3</sup>

However, recent global developments, such as Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and tensions in the Middle East, have brought back the geopolitical importance of enlargement, pushing the EU towards a more proactive approach to the Western Balkans. In this context, the region is increasingly viewed through the lens of stability and security, with the European Union strengthening its engagement in the region, reflecting a more proactive and political approach to the integration of the Western Balkans, while at the same time maintaining the advanced standards and criteria for membership.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, it can be argued that the EU's role is not only normative, but also catalytic and conditional. The European Commission's country reports for all three countries provide a continuous and standardised assessment of their performance, identifying the gap between political commitments and actual results in practice. For instance, in the case of Kosovo, this gap remains pronounced, reflecting a situation where there is a clear strategic orientation towards the EU, but with significant challenges in implementation and institutional functioning.

At the same time, recent developments in the enlargement process indicate that the EU is moving towards a more pragmatic and differentiated approach. The decision to decouple the integration paths of Albania and North Macedonia reflects a shift from a regionally packaged approach towards a more merit-based approach, where individual country progress determines the pace of advancement.

However, despite the existence of a clear framework, the challenge remains in ensuring the predictability and consistency of the process. Political conditionalities, bilateral issues and internal EU dynamics often affect the pace of integration, creating both certainty and uncertainty for aspiring countries.

In this context, the EU's role is twofold:

- on the one hand, to provide a clear, credible and merit-based framework;
- and on the other, to ensure that the process remains predictable and fair, by limiting the influence of political factors that go beyond the actual performance of countries.

In conclusion, the future of the European integration process in the Western Balkans will depend on the European Union's ability to maintain a sustainable

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<sup>3</sup> Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), *The EU and the Western Balkans: From Enlargement Fatigue to Strategic Engagement*, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, *EU Enlargement Package 2023*; European Council Conclusions, 23–24 June 2022

balance between a merit-based approach and political realities, ensuring a credible, predictable and fair process. At the same time, responsibility also lies with the aspiring countries to move beyond formal commitments towards tangible and sustainable results in practice. Only through this combination of mutual responsibility can trust in the process be restored and European integration remain a credible and motivating perspective for the region.

### 4.3. Growth Plan

The European Union's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans represents a new and more pragmatic approach to the enlargement process, aiming to ensure that the integration of countries in the region does not remain solely a long-term political perspective, but delivers concrete and measurable benefits already in the early stages. Through the Reform and Growth Facility, the Plan directly links the implementation of reforms with financial support and gradual integration into the EU Single Market.

At its core, the Plan aims to accelerate the economic and institutional convergence of the region with the EU, including ambitious objectives such as doubling the economies of the Western Balkan countries within a decade. It is built on four key pillars:

- a) integration into the EU market;
- b) strengthening the Common Regional Market;
- c) the implementation of fundamental reforms for accession; and
- d) the provision of performance-based financial support.

The €6 billion financial package is disbursed based on countries' concrete results in implementing reforms.<sup>5</sup>

This approach reflects a fundamental shift in the logic of enlargement: from a process based primarily on legal alignment to a model that requires effective implementation and measurable results in practice. In this context, the performance of countries in the region in implementing the Growth Plan remains uneven and reflects existing differences in institutional capacity and political stability.

In the case of Kosovo, although the Reform Agenda 2024–2027 was negotiated and approved in October 2024, the implementation of the Growth Plan has been characterised by considerable delays. These delays are directly linked to political developments during 2025, which has been described as a “lost year” for reforms due to institutional blockages and the ineffective functioning of institutions.<sup>6</sup> Although the agreements under the Growth Plan were ratified by the Assembly in early 2026, the preceding period of stagnation resulted in a substantial loss of time in the initial stages of implementation.

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<sup>5</sup> Per me shume per planin e rritjes se BE per Ballkanin Perendimor shih: [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/growth-plan-western-balkans\\_en](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/growth-plan-western-balkans_en)

<sup>6</sup> The draft report of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, dated 6 March 2026, describes 2025 as a lost year for Kosovo in the process of European integration. This report is still in draft form and has not yet been published on the official website of the European Parliament.

Political developments following the 2025 elections, including challenges in the functioning of institutions, present additional risks to the pace of reform implementation. As a result, Kosovo is currently at an early stage of implementation, with limited progress and a real risk that, due to limited absorption capacity, it may not fully utilise the allocated funds.

In contrast, Albania demonstrates a more advanced trajectory in the implementation of the Growth Plan. Being in the negotiation phase with the EU and having a more consolidated reform base, Albania has more developed institutional capacities to implement the Reform Agenda and benefit from the Plan's financial mechanisms. This is reflected in its concrete performance, where by July 2025 Albania had implemented 38 out of 41 required steps under the agreement, positioning itself as one of the most advanced countries in the region in terms of implementation. As a result, by March 2025, Albania had benefited from approximately €163.8 million from the Growth Plan funds, while the initial EU disbursements confirm the direct link between reform performance and financial support. Furthermore, international assessments of governance and political transformation position Albania among the most advanced countries in the region.

North Macedonia, although for a long time among the most advanced countries in the European integration process, currently presents a more complex situation, characterised by a contrast between existing capacities and actual performance in implementation. On the one hand, the country has a consolidated reform framework and relatively solid institutional capacities for implementing the Growth Plan, which is also reflected in concrete financial benefits, having so far received approximately €68 million under this instrument.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, political stagnation, internal polarisation and blockages related to the integration process have directly affected the pace and consistency of reforms. As a result, although the potential for advancement remains high, progress is characterised by fragmentation and inconsistency, reflecting a situation where institutional capacity does not consistently translate into tangible results in practice.

From a comparative perspective, the analysis of the implementation of the Growth Plan highlights three distinct trajectories in the region: Albania as a country in a more advanced phase of consolidation and implementation; North Macedonia as a country with high potential; and Kosovo as a country at an early stage, facing pronounced institutional and implementation challenges.

## **5. Key findings from the Workshops**

As part of efforts to support the European integration process in the region, the Kosovo Law Institute (KLI), in cooperation with partner organisations SCOOP from Albania and CSDG from North Macedonia, organised a series of regional workshops with the participation of civil society representatives, institutional officials and field experts. The workshops, held in Tirana, Pristina and Skopje,

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<sup>7</sup> Reform Monitor (2025), RGF Payment Annex – North Macedonia

focused on analysing progress and challenges in the implementation of reforms within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, with particular emphasis on the rule of law and the functioning of institutions.

The discussions highlighted that the integration process is not merely a technical process of legal approximation, but requires effective implementation of reforms and tangible results in practice, through strengthening institutions, enhancing accountability, and ensuring the involvement of relevant stakeholders in the process.

### **5.1. Findings from the Workshop in Tirana**

The findings from the workshop held in Tirana reflect a comprehensive approach to the European integration process, emphasising that it should not be treated merely as a technical exercise of legal approximation, but as a profound institutional and societal transformation. In this regard, it was highlighted that the process of “Europeanisation” unfolds in parallel with negotiations and encompasses not only the alignment of legislation, but also the internalisation of the values of the rule of law, accountability and societal inclusion.

One of the key findings relates to the importance of involving various actors in the integration process, particularly civil society, which has been identified as a strategic actor in monitoring reforms and enhancing transparency and accountability of public institutions. In this context, it was emphasised that structured mechanisms, such as the Platform for Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, contribute to improving public debate and enabling broader participation of professional actors in the process.

However, it was noted that progress in certain areas of the rule of law, particularly in the fight against corruption and organised crime, remains limited, while the lack of democratic accountability continues to contribute to the stagnation of reforms. In this regard, the need for greater mobilisation of societal actors to exert pressure on institutions for the effective implementation of reforms was highlighted.

With regard to Kosovo, it was emphasised that the country remains at an early stage of the integration process, relying primarily on the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and without advancement to more advanced stages of the process. At the same time, it was noted that Albania’s experience demonstrates that the opening of chapters marks only the beginning of a more demanding phase of reforms, while factors such as political stability, institutional continuity and political consensus are essential for advancing the process.

It was further highlighted that the integration process for Kosovo remains closely linked to developments in foreign policy, particularly the dialogue with Serbia, making progress in this process conditional on political and international factors. In this context, the lack of a consistent and coordinated

institutional approach was identified as one of the main challenges to advancing European integration.

Within the discussions, the importance of understanding the institutional structure and decision-making mechanisms of the European Union was also emphasised, as a prerequisite for effective participation in the integration process. It was noted that the functioning of the EU institutional system requires not only legal approximation, but also the development of administrative and institutional capacities for the effective implementation of the *acquis* and active participation in decision-making processes.

Overall, the findings from the workshop in Tirana underline that progress in the European integration process requires a coordinated, inclusive and sustainable approach, combining legal reform with institutional strengthening, enhanced accountability, and the active involvement of various actors in the process.

## **5.2. Findings from the Workshop in Prishtina**

The findings from the workshop held in Pristina emphasise the central importance of the rule of law and the effective functioning of institutions in the European integration process, reflecting a stronger focus on concrete performance in Chapters 23 and 24. In this regard, it was noted that the European Union's new enlargement methodology places progress in the Fundamentals cluster as a determining factor for advancement across all other areas of the negotiation process.

Drawing on Albania's experience, it was highlighted that, despite progress achieved in the negotiation process, including the opening of all chapters and the implementation of justice reform through the vetting process, significant challenges remain in ensuring sustainable results in practice, particularly in the fight against corruption and in improving inter-institutional coordination.

At the same time, it was assessed that progress in North Macedonia remains limited, with a lack of tangible improvements in the functioning of the judiciary and in the fight against corruption, while the implementation of the legal framework continues to pose challenges. It was emphasised that the lack of concrete results and insufficient institutional capacities continue to hinder progress towards European Union standards.

With regard to Kosovo, it was highlighted that progress within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals remains limited, with pronounced challenges in establishing a sustainable track record in the fight against corruption and organised crime. In this context, it was emphasised that interference and public pressure on the judiciary, lack of stability within the prosecutorial system, and institutional fragmentation directly affect the effective functioning of the justice system.

It was also noted that inter-institutional cooperation in handling complex cases remains limited, while the non-enforcement of judicial decisions and reforms in practice continues to undermine the credibility of institutions and the functioning of the rule of law.

Within the discussions, the role of civil society in supporting the integration process was also emphasised, particularly through monitoring reforms and contributing to enhanced transparency and accountability, although its involvement continues to face challenges related to capacities and the effective functioning of existing cooperation mechanisms.

Overall, the findings from the workshop in Pristina underline that the main challenge for countries in the region remains the transition from formal compliance to the effective implementation of reforms, through strengthening institutions, enhancing inter-institutional coordination, and ensuring tangible results in the area of the rule of law.

### **5.3. Findings from the Workshop in Skopje**

The findings from the workshop held in Skopje emphasise the direct interlinkage between good neighbourly relations and institutional performance in the European integration process, underlining that the fulfilment of political criteria cannot be treated separately from the effective functioning of institutions. In this regard, it was noted that, despite declared political commitment to regional cooperation, a significant gap remains between commitments and their implementation in practice.

With regard to Kosovo, it was highlighted that progress in the area of the rule of law remains limited and largely confined to the legislative level, while implementation in practice continues to be weak and inconsistent. It was noted that the lack of inter-institutional cooperation, gaps in the functioning of the justice system, and the lack of institutional stability directly affect overall institutional performance. In this context, issues such as the non-enforcement of judicial decisions and administrative reforms were also highlighted as contributing to the weakening of the rule of law and increasing the burden on the system.

In the area of public administration, stagnation in the implementation of reforms and persistent challenges in ensuring a sustainable, professional and merit-based system were identified. It was emphasised that legal uncertainty and frequent contestation of legislation negatively affect the functioning and credibility of institutions.

In a broader context, it was emphasised that good neighbourly relations constitute an essential component of the European integration process and are closely linked to the European Union's foreign and security policy. Alignment with EU policies in this area, including the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), was assessed as essential for advancing in the integration process.

It was also highlighted that regional cooperation and the development of sustainable neighbourly relations require not only political commitment, but also functional institutions and developed administrative capacities. In this regard, institutional performance and public administration were considered

key to the effective implementation of the EU acquis and the fulfilment of accession criteria.

Overall, the findings from the workshop in Skopje underline that progress in the European integration process depends on the ability of countries to ensure a sustainable interlinkage between regional cooperation and the effective functioning of institutions, through strengthening the rule of law, enhancing administrative capacities, and ensuring the consistent implementation of reforms in practice.

## 6. Country-Specific Overview

**Albania** – has passed the phase of establishing the legal and institutional framework, but the main challenge remains the implementation deficit and the lack of consolidated results. Despite profound reforms, particularly in the justice sector, the system continues to be characterized by a persistent gap between institutional architecture and actual performance.

**e) Rule of law** – Albania continues to face an insufficient and inconsistent “track record” in the fight against high-level corruption, limiting the real impact of justice reform. Although new institutions are operational, they are still in a consolidation phase and depend more on individual capacities than on sustainable systemic mechanisms. At the same time, operational efficiency remains low, reflected in prolonged judicial proceedings and case backlog, while the enforcement of court decisions continues to be selective and inconsistent.

**f) Fight against corruption** – Albania continues to face a high level of corruption, particularly at high levels, where results remain limited and unsustainable. Institutional efforts are often fragmented, focusing on individual cases without establishing a consolidated preventive and punitive approach. Additionally, financial investigations and asset confiscation have not yet reached a sufficient level of effectiveness to create systemic impact.

**g) Functioning of democratic institutions** – The functioning of institutions continues to be affected by deep political polarization, which limits constructive dialogue and the implementation of reforms. The oversight role of Parliament remains weak, while accountability processes are often formal rather than substantive, affecting transparency and the effectiveness of decision-making.

**h) Public administration** – Despite a developed legal framework, public administration continues to be characterized by partial implementation of reforms and ongoing political influence. Challenges in ensuring meritocracy and staff stability persist, while professional and managerial capacities are not sustainably consolidated.

**i) Fundamental rights** – Albania has made progress in the normative aspect, but challenges remain in the practical implementation of fundamental rights. The protection of vulnerable groups is limited, while the environment for media and journalists remains fragile, reflecting ongoing pressures and a lack of full guarantees for the free exercise of the profession.

**North Macedonia** – presents a relatively consolidated legal and institutional framework, but the main challenge remains the weak and inconsistent implementation of reforms. Progress is characterized by fluctuations and partial stagnation, influenced by political polarization, lack of consensus on key reforms, and external factors that have slowed the integration process.

**a) Rule of law** – North Macedonia continues to face challenges in ensuring the independence and effective functioning of the judiciary, where political interference and institutional pressures remain a concern. The efficiency of the justice system is limited, while results in the fight against high-level corruption remain insufficient and unconvincing in establishing a sustainable “track record.”

**b) Fight against corruption** – Despite the existence of relevant institutions and mechanisms, corruption remains a serious problem, with weak implementation and limited results. The lack of consistent accountability and political interference affects the effectiveness of anti-corruption policies.

**c) Functioning of democratic institutions** – Deep political polarization continues to affect institutional functioning and the stability of reform processes. Political dialogue remains fragile, while decision-making processes are often hindered by the lack of inter-party consensus.

**d) Public administration** – Public administration faces challenges in depoliticization and ensuring meritocracy. Although a developed legal framework exists, its implementation remains partial, while administrative and managerial capacities are not sustainably consolidated.

**e) Fundamental rights** – The practical implementation of fundamental rights remains uneven, while the protection of vulnerable groups and the full functioning of protection mechanisms require improvement. The media environment and freedom of expression continue to face structural challenges.

**Kosovo** – is at an earlier stage of development within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, with pronounced challenges in implementation, institutional coordination, and capacity building. The gap between reform commitments and concrete results remains significant, reflecting an unstable and fragmented reform process.

**a) Rule of law** – Kosovo continues to face serious challenges in the effective functioning of the justice system, including the lack of sustainable results in tackling high-level corruption. Institutional capacities remain limited, while law enforcement is often inconsistent and unstable.

**b) Fight against corruption** – Corruption remains widespread, with a lack of a convincing “track record” in prosecuting and sanctioning high-profile cases. Preventive and punitive mechanisms are fragmented and have limited impact in practice.

**c) Functioning of democratic institutions** – Challenges in institutional coordination and the stable functioning of institutions remain present. Decision-making processes are often characterized by inconsistency and lack of inter-institutional cooperation.

**d) Public administration** – Public administration reforms remain incomplete and unstable, accompanied by legal ambiguities and institutional interference. Administrative capacities are limited, while the stability and professionalism of the civil service remain a challenge.

**e) Fundamental rights** – The implementation of fundamental rights remains weak in practice, with challenges in protecting vulnerable groups and ensuring equality. The media environment and institutional transparency continue to require significant improvement.

Area / Chapter	Albania	North Macedonia	Kosovo
Functioning of Democratic Institutions	3–4	3	2
Public Administration Reform	3–4	3	2–3
Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights)	4	3	2
Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security)	4	3	2–3
Fight against Corruption	4	2–3	2
Overall Average for Cluster 1	4	3	2–2.5

**Table 3 - Assessment of the level of preparedness and progress by areas under Cluster 1 (Fundamentals)<sup>8</sup>.**

<sup>8</sup> For comparative purposes, the qualitative assessments of the European Commission have been converted into a numerical scale of 1–5 (from backsliding to good progress). Based on this methodology, the table above presents the progress assessed by the European Commission for all three countries.

From a comparative perspective, the three countries illustrate different stages of the same process:

- Albania → consolidation phase and delivery of results
- North Macedonia → established framework phase, but weak implementation
- Kosovo → capacity-building phase with limited implementation

However, one common feature remains clear: the issue is no longer the absence of legislation, but rather the lack of implementation and tangible results. This makes Cluster 1 not only a technical criterion, but a direct test of state functionality and the credibility of institutions in the region.

## **6.1. Albania: From Reforms to Negotiations**

Within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, Albania has demonstrated steady and measurable progress, transitioning from an intensive reform-driven phase—particularly marked by the comprehensive justice reform initiated in 2016—towards a more advanced stage characterized by active negotiations and the opening of all chapters by the end of 2025. This shift reflects not only the completion of key structural reforms but also Albania's increased administrative and political capacity to engage with the technical demands of the accession process.

According to the European Commission's 2025 assessment, Albania remains moderately prepared, with continuous but uneven progress across the components of Cluster 1. The most notable advancements are observed in the rule of law domain, particularly within the framework of judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts. The vetting process has significantly reshaped the judiciary by removing compromised judges and prosecutors, thereby enhancing institutional integrity and formal independence. In parallel, specialized institutions—most notably the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK)—have strengthened investigative and prosecutorial capacities, including in cases involving high-level officials.

However, the Commission emphasizes that the sustainability and credibility of these reforms now depend on the delivery of tangible and consistent results, especially in terms of final convictions in high-level corruption and organized crime cases, as well as the effective confiscation of illicit assets. The current imbalance between institutional restructuring and measurable outcomes remains a central concern, indicating that Albania is entering a phase where performance, rather than structural compliance, becomes the primary benchmark.

With regard to the functioning of democratic institutions, Albania maintains overall institutional stability, with regular electoral processes and a functioning constitutional order. Nevertheless, the quality of democratic governance continues to be affected by persistent political polarization, which limits constructive dialogue, weakens parliamentary oversight of the executive, and

affects the inclusiveness of the legislative process. While Parliament fulfills its formal legislative role, its capacity to act as an effective check on executive power remains constrained, reflecting a broader issue of imbalanced separation of powers.

In the area of public administration reform, Albania has made progress in terms of adopting strategic frameworks and improving formal procedures related to recruitment and professional standards. Despite these efforts, the Commission continues to underline structural challenges related to politicization, limited administrative capacity, and insufficient merit-based practices. These issues directly affect the consistency and impartiality of policy implementation, thereby influencing the overall effectiveness of governance.

Albania's trajectory in the EU integration process has been gradual but increasingly accelerated. After obtaining candidate country status in 2014, the country entered a prolonged period of conditionality focused on justice reform and political stabilization. The opening of accession negotiations in 2022, followed by the rapid progression in screening and the opening of chapters, reflects both domestic reform efforts and a more strategic and geopolitically driven EU enlargement approach in the Western Balkans.

At its current stage, Albania is no longer primarily assessed on its ability to adopt legislation or establish institutions, but rather on its capacity to consolidate reforms and ensure their effective, impartial, and sustainable implementation. This includes strengthening the track record in rule of law, improving democratic accountability, and ensuring a depoliticized and professional public administration.

In this context, the European Union's focus has clearly shifted toward tangible results and systemic resilience. The coming phase of the accession process—reflected already in the 2025 report and likely to be reinforced in subsequent assessments—will require Albania to demonstrate that its institutions not only function formally, but also deliver consistent outcomes aligned with EU standards in practice.

## **6.2. North Macedonia: Adequate Framework, Moderate Progress**

Within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, North Macedonia continues to be assessed by the European Commission as moderately prepared, with some limited and uneven progress in recent years. The legal and institutional framework is relatively well consolidated; however, the main challenge remains the effective implementation of reforms and the delivery of tangible results, particularly in the rule of law and the fight against corruption.

Historically, North Macedonia has been one of the most advanced countries in the region in the European integration process, often considered a “frontrunner”. However, its progress has been significantly affected by both external and internal factors. Initially, the process was blocked for several years due to the dispute with Greece over the name issue, while more recently it has

been hindered by Bulgaria's conditionalities related to historical and identity issues. These dynamics have created a situation where technical progress does not translate into real advancement in the integration process.

Domestically, the country continues to face pronounced political polarisation, which affects the functioning of democratic institutions and the adoption of key reforms, including constitutional amendments. At the same time, inter-ethnic dynamics and the need for political balancing among ethnic groups remain important factors influencing institutional stability and decision-making processes.

Overall, North Macedonia remains a country with a solid legal foundation and a relative level of preparedness, but characterized by stagnation in advancing the integration process due to the interplay of internal political factors and external conditionalities, placing it in a position between its potential for progress and the reality of stagnation.

### **6.3. Kosovo: The Challenge of Institutional Functioning**

Within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, Kosovo continues to be assessed by the European Commission as being at an early stage / having some level of preparation, with limited and uneven progress in recent years. Unlike other countries in the region, the main challenge does not relate solely to advancement in the integration process, but to the basic functioning of institutions and the effective implementation of reforms in practice.

In the area of the rule of law, although legislative initiatives have been undertaken, progress has often remained at a formal level, while in practice there has been a lack of consistency, political interference, and insufficient inter-institutional cooperation. Institutional gaps, such as the weak functioning of key justice bodies and the absence of tangible results in the fight against high-level corruption, continue to undermine the credibility of the system.

In the field of public administration, reform processes have been characterised by legal uncertainty, delays, and repeated constitutional interventions, reflecting a fragmented reform process lacking clear direction. Rather than ensuring stability and professionalism, certain interventions have contributed to legal and institutional uncertainty.

With regard to the functioning of democratic institutions, challenges relate to the lack of institutional coordination, tensions between branches of power, and an often ad hoc approach to decision-making, undermining the principles of separation of powers and accountability. In this context, 2025 can be considered a "lost year" for undertaking the necessary reforms within Cluster 1, due to institutional blockages and the ineffective functioning of institutions, which have hindered progress in key areas such as the rule of law, public administration, and democratic governance.

Based on the European Commission's country reports for the past three years, Kosovo's progress in the European integration process remains closely linked to

the implementation of obligations arising from the EU-facilitated dialogue with Serbia. The reports consistently emphasise that constructive engagement and the implementation of agreements reached within the dialogue are essential conditions for progress towards the EU. Although Kosovo has demonstrated willingness to participate in the process, progress in implementation remains limited and uneven, often affected by political developments and tensions on the ground. The EU has underlined that the non-implementation or delay in fulfilling dialogue-related obligations directly affects the pace of European integration, making this process not only a matter of foreign policy, but also a direct component of reforms within Cluster 1. As a result, Kosovo's progress towards the EU remains conditional not only on internal reforms, but also on the normalization of relations with Serbia and the effective implementation of agreed commitments.

Overall, Kosovo represents a case where there is a clear strategic orientation towards European integration, but this orientation does not translate into consistent institutional performance or effective implementation of undertaken obligations. Beyond internal reforms, progress remains conditional on the implementation of obligations arising from the dialogue with Serbia, which continue to be characterized by a selective, not always constructive, and often inconsistent approach. Furthermore, institutional blockages, political confrontations, and the frequent use of constitutional mechanisms have resulted in functional paralysis, slowing the pace of reforms. This, together with the non-implementation of dialogue-related obligations, has contributed to an increasingly sceptical perception within the European Union regarding Kosovo's capacity to fulfil its commitments.

As a result, Kosovo remains in a capacity-building phase marked by stagnation in implementation, where the challenge lies not only in the absence of reforms on paper, but in the lack of political will, institutional coordination, and tangible results in practice.

#### **6.4. Chapter 23: Comparison Across Countries in the Region**

Within Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights), the European Commission's country reports in recent years indicate clear differences among countries in the region, as well as shared challenges related to implementation and institutional independence.

Albania stands out as the country with the most advanced progress, primarily due to its comprehensive justice reform. The vetting process and the operationalisation of new institutions have improved the integrity of the judicial system. However, the main challenge remains the consolidation of results and the establishment of a sustainable track record, particularly in high-level corruption cases.

North Macedonia remains moderately prepared, but with limited and uneven progress. While the legal framework is in place, the judicial system continues to

face political influence, lack of efficiency, and limited results in the fight against corruption, reflecting a persistent gap between law and practice.

Kosovo remains at an earlier stage, with limited progress in this chapter. The main challenges relate to the lack of full institutional independence, gaps in the functioning of justice institutions, and the absence of tangible results in the fight against corruption. In addition, challenges in institutional coordination and political interference negatively affect the overall performance of the system.

From a comparative perspective, all three countries share a common challenge: the lack of sustainable and measurable results in the rule of law, despite the existence of legal frameworks.

In conclusion, Chapter 23 remains the most critical test for progress in the integration process, where the key difference between countries lies primarily in the level of implementation and tangible results, rather than in the adoption of legislation.

## **6.5. Chapter 24: Comparison Across Countries in the Region**

Within Chapter 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security), the European Commission's country reports indicate that countries in the region have reached a certain level of preparation; however, progress remains uneven and largely limited, particularly in terms of implementation and institutional coordination.

Albania demonstrates the most advanced progress in this chapter, with notable developments in international police cooperation, border management, and the fight against organised crime. However, the main challenge remains the consolidation of results and the further strengthening of investigative and prosecutorial capacities, particularly in complex cases.

North Macedonia remains moderately prepared, with some progress in areas such as migration management and inter-institutional cooperation, but with persistent challenges in implementation efficiency and coordination among security institutions. Progress is often characterised as uneven and influenced by political and administrative factors.

Kosovo remains at an earlier stage, with limited progress across most areas of Chapter 24. Despite some improvements in border management and regional cooperation, challenges persist in institutional capacities, inter-institutional coordination, and the fight against organised crime. The lack of tangible results and weak implementation of strategies continue to constrain progress.

From a comparative perspective, all three countries face similar challenges related to the need to strengthen operational capacities and ensure concrete results in combating crime and managing security.

In conclusion, Chapter 24 demonstrates that, despite progress in building frameworks and enhancing cooperation, real advancement depends on

effective implementation, institutional coordination, and tangible results on the ground, making it a key area for the credibility of reforms in the region.

## **7. Role of Civil Society**

European Commission's country reports for Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia emphasise that civil society remains a key actor in advancing reforms, particularly within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, contributing to increased transparency, accountability and citizen participation in decision-making.

Across all three countries, a formal legal framework for public consultation exists; however, the reports underline that its implementation often remains limited. Civil society is involved in consultation processes, but frequently in a formal rather than substantive manner, with limited influence on final policy outcomes. Common challenges include restricted access to information, insufficient transparency, and the absence of a structured and continuous dialogue with institutions.

In Albania and North Macedonia, civil society plays a more consolidated role in monitoring reforms and integration processes, while in Kosovo, despite an active and critical sector, its impact often remains limited due to the lack of institutional responsiveness and challenges in implementation.

Nevertheless, in all countries, civil society plays an important watchdog role, monitoring institutional performance and contributing to the identification of shortcomings in the implementation of reforms. This role is particularly significant in areas such as the rule of law, the fight against corruption, and public administration reform.

Looking ahead, the reports suggest that the role of civil society should evolve from formal involvement to more substantive and institutionalised participation, by strengthening consultation mechanisms and ensuring that its contributions are reflected in decision-making. This requires stronger engagement from institutions to build a functional and trustworthy partnership with civil society.

## 8. Recommendations

Based on the findings from the progress reports, the regional analysis, and the discussions conducted within the framework of the project, the following recommendations aim to address key challenges within Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, with a focus on the effective implementation of reforms and the strengthening of institutions.

- **Transition from formal reforms to tangible results (track record)**

Countries in the region should focus on building a sustainable track record of results, particularly in the fight against corruption and the functioning of the judiciary. The adoption of legislation is no longer sufficient; priority should be given to its implementation and to delivering measurable and verifiable results.

- **Strengthening the independence and functioning of justice institutions**

It is essential to reduce political interference in the judicial system and ensure the full functioning of key institutions. This includes filling vacant positions, guaranteeing independent mandates, and enhancing professional capacities.

- **Depoliticization and professionalisation of the public administration**

Public administration reforms should aim to create a professional, stable, and depoliticised administration capable of implementing reforms and fulfilling obligations arising from the integration process.

- **Strengthening the functioning of democratic institutions**

A culture of political dialogue and inter-institutional cooperation should be promoted, reducing polarisation and enhancing the oversight role of parliaments. Effective institutional functioning is a prerequisite for progress in all other areas.

- **Enhancing capacities for implementation and institutional coordination**

Institutions should improve coordination among themselves and strengthen administrative capacities for policy implementation. Lack of coordination remains one of the main obstacles to real progress in the region.

- **Empowering the role of civil society**

A more substantive involvement of civil society in decision-making should be ensured, moving from formal consultation to genuine partnership. Institutions should establish mechanisms that guarantee the reflection of civil society input in policymaking.

- **Increasing the predictability and credibility of the EU integration process**

The European Union should ensure a more predictable and merit-based process, minimising the influence of political factors and bilateral issues that go beyond the actual performance of countries.

- **Addressing the impact of political and geopolitical factors on the integration process**

Both the countries and the EU should work towards an approach that balances the technical and political dimensions of integration, ensuring that the process remains fair and motivating for aspiring countries.



