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

"REFORMS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RHETORIC: REGIONAL CHALLENGES ON THE PATH TO THE EUROPEAN UNION"



NEWSLETTER

EIGHTH PLENARY AND FOURTH REGIONAL PLENARY CONFERENCE



Европско движење Северна Македонија
European Movement North Macedonia



Let the Justice
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SFPA
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On 26 and 27 November 2025, we held the Fourth Regional Plenary Conference of the National Convention on the European Union of the Republic of North Macedonia (NKEU-MK), under the theme "Reforms Beyond Rhetoric: Regional Challenges on the Path to the European Union." The conference served as a crucial platform for structured dialogue among state institutions, civil society, and the expert public, addressing the critical state of North Macedonia's EU accession process and its regional context.

The discussions, compiled in this bulletin, reflect a deep and often critical analysis of the country's European path. Although the formal opening of negotiations is acknowledged, a central theme throughout the conference is the substantive stalemate in the process. Keynote speakers, including National Coordinator Professor Mileva Đurovska, Parliament Speaker Afrim Gashi, and National Council for European Integration President Venko Filipče, unanimously highlighted the stagnation, emphasizing that the core challenges lie in the insufficient implementation of reforms, particularly within the rule of law and the fight against corruption. The conference sought to move beyond declarative support for EU integration, focusing instead on the "other side of rhetoric"—the concrete, often difficult, work required for institutional and societal transformation.



The bulletin captures the diverse perspectives of high-level national and international stakeholders. Speakers from the Parliament, the Government, the judiciary, and the diplomatic corps (including the ambassadors of Slovakia and the Netherlands) shared their views on progress and obstacles. A significant portion of the content is dedicated to the urgent need for judicial reform. Expert contributions, particularly from legal professionals and academics, delve into the specifics of legislative changes, the need for financial and institutional independence of the judiciary, and the imperative to modernize the system for tackling crime in the digital age. The regional dimension is equally prominent, with representatives from Serbia, Albania, and Montenegro sharing their national experiences, offering comparative insights into the successes and failures of reform processes across the Western Balkans, and underscoring the complex interplay of geopolitics, bilateral disputes, and internal political will in shaping each country's EU integration trajectory.

Ultimately, this document serves as a comprehensive record of a pivotal moment in the European integration discourse. It illustrates a broad consensus on the strategic goal of EU membership while simultaneously revealing deep-seated disagreements and challenges regarding the path to that goal. The conference materials, detailed in this bulletin, confirm that progress depends not on political rhetoric but on the tangible, consistent, and transparent implementation of reforms. The shared understanding is that without a renewed commitment to the rule of law, institutional integrity, and genuine public dialogue, the European perspective for North Macedonia and the region remains significantly at risk.



Mileva DJUROVSKA

National Coordinator of
NKEU-MK, Professor at the
Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje,
President of the European
Movement

Professor Mileva Djurovska opened the Eighth Plenary Conference of the NKEU-MK, held at the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, emphasizing the Convention's role as a structured platform for dialogue between institutions, the civil sector, and the expert public in the European integration process.

She pointed out that in recent years, the NKEU-MK has functioned as the voice of the expert community, providing space for reasoned recommendations based on European directives and standards, with the aim of strengthening institutions and bringing society closer to the European way of life. Djurovska expressed gratitude for the continued support from the EU Delegation, the Slovak Development Agency, and the Kingdom of the Netherlands, as well as for the open cooperation with the Assembly and relevant state institutions.

In her address, she noted that, despite the formal opening of negotiations, the accession process remains substantially blocked, with the rule of law and the fight against high-level corruption being key internal challenges. According to her, without real reforms and increased trust in institutions, the European perspective cannot be sustainable, and regional cooperation through national conventions represents a significant, yet still insufficiently utilized, potential.

"European integration can only be successful if reforms are the result of open dialogue, expert argumentation, and active participation of civil society."



Afrim GASHI

President of the Assembly of the
Republic of North Macedonia

Afrim Gashi, President of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, in his address delivered a clear message that European integration remains a key and unwavering strategic interest of the state. He welcomed the national coordinator of the NKEU-MK, Mileva Djurovska, as well as representatives of institutions, the diplomatic corps, the civil sector, and the media, emphasizing that precisely such forums represent an essential space for democratic exchange of ideas and visions for the country's European future.

Gashi emphasized that the conference theme, "Reforms Beyond Rhetoric," directly calls for overcoming declarative political messages and focusing on the essence of the European integration process. According to him, the European path does not consist of general statements and political narratives, but of concrete work, institutional responsibility, and readiness to face real and often complex challenges. In that sense, he stressed that such debates inevitably involve criticism and dissatisfaction directed at various actors – the Assembly, the Government, and even the European Union – which, as he assessed, is a normal and healthy element of a functional democracy.

Continuing, the President of the Assembly addressed the frequent accusations in public discourse, whereby part of the responsibility is placed on MPs in the context of constitutional amendments, on the executive branch due to the pace of reforms, or on the European Union regarding predictability, guarantees, and double standards. Gashi assessed that all these aspects deserve careful and reasoned analysis, while simultaneously reminding that North Macedonia has reached a level of institutional maturity that imposes the need for strategic clarity and responsibility. In that direction, he unequivocally stated that the future of the state lies in the European Union and that this determination must not be subject to hesitation.

Referring to the latest European Commission report on the country's progress, Gashi emphasized that it confirms North Macedonia's European orientation but also points to serious challenges that institutions continue to face. He expressed satisfaction that the work of the Assembly was assessed as satisfactory, but noted that the remarks regarding political polarization, the frequent use of shortened legislative procedures, the need for more effective parliamentary oversight, and greater involvement of civil society represent clear guidelines for improving parliamentary work. According to him, these findings are not surprising, and precisely for that reason, from the very beginning of his mandate, he set as priorities the elevation of political culture, transparency, efficiency, and inclusiveness of the legislative process.

In that context, Gashi issued a public call to the Government and to MPs to avoid shortened procedures, to expand the space for debate, and to build a higher level of political culture. He underscored that European integration is not measured by the speed of decision-making, but by the quality of reforms and the degree of trust that institutions enjoy among citizens. He paid special attention to the constitutional amendments, assessing them as one of the key challenges in the current phase of the process, emphasizing that bilateral issues and political tensions must not become a permanent obstacle to the country's European path.

Gashi emphasized that North Macedonia remains open for principled and constructive dialogue with its neighbors and that the progress of countries in the region, such as Albania and Montenegro, is proof that the enlargement policy is alive. In conditions of global security and political crises, integration into the European Union, according to him, is not a luxury but a necessity for the stability, security, and long-term development of the state. He reminded that NATO membership provides a security framework, while EU membership represents a path toward sustainable economic, institutional, and democratic progress.

"European integration is not merely a foreign policy goal, but a process that requires functional institutions, responsible political culture, and continuous dialogue among all societal actors."



Venko FILIPCHE

President of the National Council
for European Integration in the
Assembly of the Republic of
North Macedonia

Venko Filipche, President of the National Council for European Integration in the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, delivered an open and critical assessment of the state of European integrations, emphasizing that the country has been stagnating for a prolonged period and is missing the historical opportunity for substantive progress.

Filipče first welcomed the organization of the conference and highlighted the importance of the National Convention and the National Council for European Integration as forums that gather opinions from various societal actors – institutions, chambers of commerce, trade unions, the academic community, civil and religious organizations. According to him, only through such an inclusive approach and through a synthesis of expert opinions can real and sustainable policies be created in the European integration process.

He assessed that over the past year and a half, the public debate has been reduced to the constant repetition of the same messages about the need for reforms and progress, without concrete results on the ground. In the meantime, as he emphasized, the country is marking time, losing precious time, and young people are increasingly leaving the state in search of better living conditions. According to Filipče, European integrations are the only real path forward, which, as he said, is confirmed by the experiences of the countries from the former Eastern Bloc and the region. He cited Poland as an example of a country whose economic growth and development are a direct consequence of the European integration process, access to the common market, and deep systemic reforms.

Referring to the latest European Commission report, Filipče expressed serious concern, assessing it as the worst in the last decade, with the exception of 2015 when the country was assessed as a "captured state." He emphasized that despite the European Union's clear will for enlargement, the report unequivocally concludes that there are no substantive reforms in the country. According to him, pressure on the judiciary, the politicization of institutions, and the absence of systemic changes indicate a continuity of a problematic model of governance.

Filipche pointed out that North Macedonia receives significantly less European financial support compared to countries that have already become EU members. He emphasized that while Western Balkan countries received around six billion euros in support over multi-year periods, countries like Croatia and Bulgaria received approximately 40 billion euros in grants for reforms and infrastructure. In that regard, he sharply criticized the practice of borrowing through questionable loans for infrastructure projects, when the same could be realized with non-repayable European funds, warning that in this way future generations are being burdened.

Continuing, Filipche noted that even in the case of immediately adopting the constitutional amendments, the country would not be ready to begin substantive negotiations with the European Union, due to the unadopted roadmaps for the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, and public administration reform. He assessed that this seriously calls into question the political will of the current government for genuine progress in the European integration process.

He placed special emphasis on the weaknesses in the judiciary and the fight against corruption, stating that key laws have not been adopted, the role of the Judicial Council has not been strengthened, the electronic system for case management is not consistently applied, and public prosecutor's offices are facing a shortage of human and financial resources. Additionally, he pointed to the limited progress in media freedoms, as well as the frequent use of shortened procedures in the Assembly, which reduces the possibility for quality and inclusive legislative debate.

"The National Convention on the EU represents a key platform where expert arguments and civic contributions are directly embedded in the creation of European policies and reform priorities."





Igor ZDRAVKOVSKI

Deputy President of the
Committee on European Affairs
in the Assembly of the Republic
of North Macedonia

Igor Zdravkovski, Deputy President of the Committee on European Affairs in the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, emphasized the importance of the Convention as an inclusive platform for substantive public debate on reforms and European integration. He stressed that precisely such forums enable open dialogue between institutions, the parliament, civil society, the academic community, and international partners, with the aim of more effectively shaping national policies for accession to the European Union.

Zdravkovski underscored that the Committee on European Affairs, as a key parliamentary body, has a special responsibility in implementing reforms and fulfilling the obligations arising from the European agenda. According to him, the focus must be placed on alignment with EU law, strengthening institutional capacities, and ensuring a transparent, inclusive, and predictable reform process. He also referred to the recent joint session of the Committee and the National Council for European Integration, at which the European Commission's Annual Report was reviewed, assessing that it represents a clear indicator both of what has been achieved and of the serious weaknesses that must be urgently addressed.

In his presentation, Zdravkovski also emphasized the importance of the Western Balkan Growth Plan, adopted by the European Commission in 2023, as a significant political and financial instrument that enables countries in the region to access part of the Union's benefits even before formal membership. According to him, deepening economic cooperation, the green agenda, and digital transition are key priorities for faster and more sustainable development of the state, whereby any stagnation in reforms represents lost time that will have to be compensated by future generations.

He placed special emphasis on reforms in the area of the rule of law, stressing that they must be based on broad political, expert, and social consensus, rather than on majority vote. He reminded that the prolonged regression in the European Commission's reports, especially after 2013, is a result of unfulfilled domestic obligations and insufficient alignment with European criteria. In that context, Zdravkovski emphasized that the misuse of the European flag and shortened procedures must become a thing of the past and that

The Committee on European Affairs will insist on a substantive, rather than declarative, reform approach. He concluded that the way out of the current stalemate is possible only through shared responsibility, mature dialogue, and a clear commitment to first complete the "homework," and then continue along the European path with greater credibility and trust.

"Reforms related to the European agenda require political maturity, consensus, and a clear orientation toward the rule of law as a foundation for progress and citizen trust."

Iveta HRICOVÁ

Ambassador of the Republic of
Slovakia to the Republic of
North Macedonia



Iveta Hricová, Ambassador of the Republic of Slovakia to the Republic of North Macedonia, expressed strong support for the country's European perspective and emphasized the value of the Convention as a platform for inclusive and expert dialogue.

She stressed that the presence of a large number of participants at the plenary session is a clear indicator of the country's commitment to reforms, transparency, and constructive debate. According to Ambassador Hricová, North Macedonia is at an important and sensitive moment on its European path – a process that is not easy and requires patience, political courage, and the ability to make decisions that bring long-term benefits for citizens. She emphasized that the country has shown resilience and capacity for finding common solutions even in complex political circumstances in the past, and precisely for that reason the National Convention holds particular value.

The Ambassador underscored that Slovakia, together with other member states of the European Union, firmly stands behind North Macedonia, offering not only financial and technical support but also sharing its own experiences from the EU accession process. She emphasized that strengthening institutions, building trust, and implementing deep reforms are complex and long-term processes, but that success is possible only if reforms have broad support from citizens and if their benefits are clearly visible.

Hricová pointed out that the European Union carefully monitors progress in key areas such as the rule of law, the independence of institutions, and constitutional issues, not as formal conditions, but as the foundation of every stable democracy. These reforms, according to her, create trust, attract investments, and provide citizens with the assurance that the state functions in their interest.

In her conclusion, she emphasized that although the decisions ahead are politically sensitive and difficult, they simultaneously represent an opportunity for building a more secure, more stable, and more European future. The Ambassador conveyed that the path toward the European Union is based on cooperation between institutions, experts, civil society, and citizens, and confirmed that Slovakia will continue to be a committed partner and supporter of North Macedonia on this path.

"The rule of law, independent institutions, and citizen trust are not formal conditions in the accession process, but the foundation of every stable and democratic state and a prerequisite for a sustainable European future."



Özlem CANEL

Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the Republic of North Macedonia

Özlem Canel, Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the Republic of North Macedonia, expressed strong and consistent support for the European perspective of North Macedonia and the region, emphasizing that the time for decisive action is precisely now.

She recalled that this is her second participation in the conference and that both the National Convention and the regional project "Let Justice Rule the Region," supported through the MATRA program, represent significant platforms that support integration into the European Union. According to Canel, these initiatives have a key role in uniting experts and civil society from North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania, with the aim of jointly identifying and overcoming the challenges of the European integration process, particularly in the area of the rule of law.

The Ambassador emphasized that the countries in the region are at different stages of the accession process and face specific challenges, which is why an adapted and realistic reform approach is needed. In that regard, she highlighted the importance of the European Commission reports and the rule of law reports as key tools that provide a clear picture of progress, but also of areas where reforms are stagnating, especially in the fight against corruption and organized crime. Additionally, the Western Balkan Growth Plan, according to her, represents a significant financial instrument for supporting these reform processes.

In her speech, Canel pointed out that the Netherlands, like other member states of the European Union, remains firmly committed to supporting reforms in the region, with a clear goal – a stable, prosperous, and integrated

Western Balkans within the EU. She emphasized the need not to lose additional time and stressed that for North Macedonia, the key step is unlocking the formal start of accession negotiations through the implementation of constitutional amendments, in accordance with the conclusions of the EU Council from 2023. The Ambassador particularly underscored the rule of law as the foundation of the accession process, emphasizing that an independent judiciary, the fight against corruption and organized crime, and public administration reforms are essential not only for entry into the European Union but also for successful functioning as a future member state. Additionally, she pointed to the need for accelerating economic growth and approaching the European living standard, whereby the region faces serious structural challenges, such as youth emigration, dependence on imported energy, infrastructure gaps, and climate risks.

"The time for decisions and reforms is now. The rule of law, the fight against corruption, and an independent judiciary are the most fundamental condition both for EU membership and for a successful state."

Marija PETRUSHEVSKA

MP, Vice-President of the Committee on European Affairs of the Assembly



Marija Petrushevska, MP and Vice-President of the Committee on European Affairs at the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, emphasized that it is a particular honor for her to address the National Convention at a moment when European integration is once again high on the political and institutional agenda. She stressed that the European Union enlargement process is gaining new dynamics, especially through the positive messages coming from European institutions, including the position that bilateral issues should be considered separately from the enlargement process itself.

Petrushevska referred to the latest European Commission reports for the countries in the region, assessing them as a clear roadmap for the reforms that need to be delivered, but also as a realistic picture of the progress achieved and the remaining challenges. In that context, she underscored that the Assembly has one of the key roles in the European integration process, particularly through its legislative function, oversight of the executive branch, and building political consensus.

As a long-time witness to the European integration process, she recalled that North Macedonia has been receiving recommendations to start negotiations for two decades now, which, according to her, clearly indicates that the European perspective is real and achievable, provided there is sufficient political will. In that direction, Petrushevska emphasized that reforms are not only a condition for membership but directly affect the quality of life of citizens, the strengthening of institutions, and economic development.

Special emphasis was placed on reforms in the areas of the rule of law, the judiciary, and the public prosecutor's office, as the foundation of the accession process, but also on progress in economic policies, digital transformation, and the green agenda. She stressed that improving public services is of essential importance, as they are the first point of contact between citizens and the state, and digitalization directly contributes to reducing corruption risks.

Petrushevska emphasized that full membership in the European Union remains a strategic priority for the parliamentary majority and for the majority of political entities. She reiterated that bilateral disputes should not hold the enlargement process hostage and called for political maturity, regional cooperation, and a shared commitment to the country's European future.

"European reforms are not only a condition for membership in the European Union, but an essential process for strengthening institutions, improving public services, and increasing citizens' trust in the state."



Viktorija TRAJKOV

Deputy Minister for European
Affairs, Republic of North
Macedonia

Viktorija Trajkov, Deputy Minister for European Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, emphasized that the National Convention represents an exceptionally significant platform for continuous and reasoned public debate on the country's European future. She stressed that the European integration process must be discussed daily, clearly, and honestly, especially with young people.

Referring to a recent meeting with students, Trajkov pointed out that young people in North Macedonia largely support European integration but express the view that membership should not be achieved "at any cost." According to her, precisely such dilemmas, if not addressed with arguments and transparent communication, can contribute to the growth of euroscepticism, which represents a serious challenge to the state's European agenda.

In that context, she called for a joint engagement of institutions, the academic community, civil society organizations, and public figures in order to strengthen citizens' trust in the process.

Trajkov emphasized that European integration means above all progress, the introduction of European standards, and the improvement of citizens' quality of life. Although North Macedonia, as she pointed out, has made significant sacrifices and concessions on its European path, the Government remains fully committed to implementing reforms, turning challenges into opportunities.

She informed that the state's reform agenda has been highly assessed and that North Macedonia is the first country in the region to receive pre-financing funds within the European Union's Growth Plan, in the amount of 7 percent of the total planned 750 million euros. These funds, according to her, will be directed toward investments and reforms in priority areas such as public administration, public finance management, energy and digital transition, human capital, the business environment, and the rule of law.

As a concrete example of progress, Trajkov pointed to the country's accession to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), whereby citizens and companies will have faster, more efficient, and cheaper transactions in euros, under the same conditions as in the member states of the European Union. She concluded that only through commitment, dialogue, and regional cooperation can the strategic goal be achieved – full membership in the European Union.

"European integration means introducing standards and a better life for citizens, and our obligation is through reforms and open dialogue to maintain trust and support, especially among young people."

Tomáš STRAŽAJ

Director of the Slovak
Association for Foreign Policy,
Bratislava



Tomáš Stražaj, Director of the Slovak Association for Foreign Policy from Bratislava, noted that the National Convention on the European Union represents a rare and valuable example of balanced, inclusive, and substantive dialogue on European integration, which, according to him, is increasingly rare even within the European Union itself. He emphasized that although the Slovak national convention project was completed several years ago, Slovakia's experience offers important lessons on how – and how not – to communicate about the European Union.

Stražaj pointed out that euroscepticism is not a phenomenon limited only to candidate countries, but is also present in EU member states. As an example, he cited Slovakia, where support for membership in the European Union is relatively high, around 75 percent, but at the same time as many as 66 percent of citizens believe that "Brussels dictates policies" to national authorities. This, as he called it, "cognitive conflict" indicates a serious problem in the public discourse about the EU.

Additionally, he emphasized that citizens' trust in the institutions of the European Union is significantly higher than trust in national institutions, but despite this, the EU is often perceived as a distant and imposed center of power. According to Stražaj, part of the responsibility for this situation lies with the European Union itself, which does not communicate clearly and transparently enough about its policies, budget priorities, and the enlargement process.

He also warned of the danger of creating unrealistic expectations from EU membership. Slovakia's entry into the Union, as he pointed out, was presented as "entry into paradise," which led to disappointment among some citizens when socio-economic problems were not solved overnight. According to him, the European Union should not be portrayed either as exclusively a community of values or as an "ATM," but as a complex political and economic project that requires responsibility, reforms, and active participation.

In conclusion, Stražaj emphasized that a key prerequisite for successful European integration is the existence of broad national consensus and honest public debate, both in candidate countries and in member states, because without such consensus, the process can easily become a hostage of daily politics and disinformation.

"Euroscepticism does not disappear with membership in the European Union – it decreases only if there is honest, realistic, and responsible communication with citizen

Muçaj emphasized that in Albania there is no pronounced euroscepticism, citing Eurobarometer data according to which as many as 91 percent of citizens support membership in the European Union. According to her, this broad support is the result of concrete and visible reforms, especially in the area of the rule of law. She highlighted the comprehensive judicial reform, which included a vetting process, the establishment of independent judicial bodies, and the formation of a specialized prosecutor's office for the fight against corruption and organized crime – an institution that enjoys high trust among citizens.

Additionally, she pointed out that Albania has achieved significant progress in digitalization, with over 95 percent of public services being digitalized and aligned with EU standards. An interoperable digital platform has been introduced that connects over 50 institutions, enabling greater transparency, efficiency, and reduction of corruption risks. In this regard, Muçaj also emphasized the new anti-corruption strategy for the period 2026–2030, which includes strengthened mechanisms for controlling the property and financial flows of politically exposed persons.

Special emphasis was placed on the involvement of civil society in the accession process. She informed about the establishment of a partnership platform for European integration, which functions through a governing board and 33 thematic roundtables – one for each negotiating chapter – in which civil society organizations, the business community, and independent experts participate. Muçaj emphasized that, although significant progress has been made, the need remains for greater transparency and more systematic monitoring of the extent to which the recommendations of these bodies are incorporated into public policies.

In conclusion, she emphasized that the European integration process is not exclusively technical or institutional, but requires a multisectoral approach, strong administrative capacities, and continuous cooperation among all stakeholders, in order for reforms to be sustainable and socially accepted.



Ermelinda MUÇAJ

Project Coordinator, European
Movement of Albania

Ermelinda Muçaj, Project Coordinator at the European Movement of Albania, presented Albania's progress in the process of accession to the European Union, emphasizing the strong interdependence between reform policies, institutional will, and citizen support. She recalled that on 10 July 2024, Albania held its first intergovernmental conference with the EU, and by November 2025, it had opened all clusters in the negotiations, which represents a significant step forward in the integration process.





Bojana SELAKOVIĆ

National Coordinator, National
Convention on the European
Union in Serbia

The National Coordinator of the National Convention on the European Union in Serbia began her presentation by expressing gratitude and satisfaction with the continuous regional cooperation, especially within the framework of joint initiatives between North Macedonia and Serbia. She emphasized that such forums are not merely formal meetings, but platforms for exchanging experiences, knowledge, and jointly building reform capacities, with particular focus on projects aimed at the rule of law.

Continuing, the speaker referred to her recent participation in the Enlargement Forum in Brussels, which she assessed as a significant political signal for the new dynamics in the European Union enlargement process. She emphasized that this forum represents a turning point, as for the first time in a longer period, a clear political will has been demonstrated by the EU to continue and intensify enlargement, especially in the context of current geopolitical challenges.

The key message from this event, according to her, is that enlargement is no longer a priority only for candidate countries, but is becoming a strategic necessity for the European Union itself. She connected this change with the security implications of the war in Ukraine, emphasizing that geopolitical circumstances have created a new consensus among member states on the importance of integrating the region into European structures.

However, the speaker pointed out that this renewed interest from the EU has not been sufficiently utilized by all candidate states. She noted a clear differentiation in the region, where certain states are advancing faster, while others, including Serbia, remain stuck due to a lack of political will for implementing substantive reforms.

In analyzing the Serbian case, she emphasized that the European integration process is a complex balance between technical reforms and political decisions. According to her, political elites in Serbia have for years used the issue of relations with Kosovo as a justification for the stalemate in reforms, creating a paradoxical situation in which European rhetoric coexists with the practical delay of the reform process.

This strategy, according to her, has led to confusion in the public and erosion of trust in the European integration process.

Citizens have been exposed to contradictory messages, which has resulted in incorrect perceptions about the conditions and dynamics of EU accession, especially regarding the role of bilateral disputes.

Additionally, she pointed out that the current political and social situation in Serbia, marked by protests and deep polarization, has led to the marginalization of the topic of European integration in public discourse. Instead of being a unifying strategic goal, European integration is perceived as an instrument of political power, which further complicates its legitimacy.

In conclusion, the speaker sent a clear message to North Macedonia that, despite political challenges, reform processes must continue with continuity and determination. She emphasized that North Macedonia's key advantage is the existence of a relative national consensus on the European perspective, which should be capitalized on through proactive implementation of reforms, in order not to miss the current momentum within the EU.

"The European integration process can easily become a missed opportunity if political will is absent – therefore, the continuity of reforms is crucial to keep pace with the dynamics of the European Union."

Sasho PETRUSHEVSKI

State Secretary, Ministry of
Internal Affairs



Sasho Petrushevski, State Secretary at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, addressed European integration as a common and inevitable path for North Macedonia, the Western Balkans, but also for new candidate countries such as Ukraine and Moldova. He emphasized that despite different national contexts, all states are united by the same strategic goal – a united, stronger, and stable Europe, built on shared values and standards.

Petrushevski stressed that the European path is a process filled with challenges, but also with clear successes, whereby every reform represents a step toward better alignment of societies with European norms. According to him, reforms mean introducing new rules, but also substantive progress, especially in the area of the rule of law, which is one of the five key priorities in the state's reform agenda. The successful implementation of these reforms, as he pointed out, will be concrete proof of North Macedonia's readiness for membership in the European Union, emphasizing that there is no alternative to this path.

As the bearer of Chapter 24 – Justice, Freedom, and Security, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Justice and a number of other institutions, has a central role in the implementation of reforms. Petrushevski emphasized that although some reform steps are being implemented according to the planned dynamics, others are delayed, but they have not been abandoned; rather, work is actively being done on their implementation with the aim of strengthening institutional capacities and inter-institutional cooperation.

He paid special attention to the issue of human capital, pointing out that reform processes must not depend on individuals, but on strong and functional institutions. Retaining and motivating professional staff, as well as investing in new generations, was emphasized as a key prerequisite for sustainable reforms. In that context, he highlighted the importance of the Training Center within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is integrated into the educational system and represents the foundation for creating a professional, modern, and service-oriented police force.

In a regional context, Petrushevski underscored that only through unity and intensive cooperation can the countries of the Western Balkans become equal partners to EU member states. European integration, according to him, is not only a guarantee for stability and security, but also a prerequisite for a better quality of life, strong rule of law, and a democratic society in the interest of all citizens.

"Without strong institutions and motivated human capital, reforms remain formal – and our goal is for them to bring real benefits to citizens and bring the state closer to the European Union."



**Aleksandra
DEANOSKA
TREDAFILOVA**

Coordinator of Working Group 3,
Professor, Faculty of Law
"Justinian I", Skopje

Aleksandra Deanoska Trendafilova, Coordinator of Working Group 3 and Professor at the Faculty of Law "Justinian I" – Skopje, addressed the deep and sensitive aspects of judicial reforms, emphasizing that they must not be treated exclusively as a formal obligation in the European integration process, but as an essential need of Macedonian society. She emphasized that the two key laws under debate represent a central part of the judicial reform and precisely for that reason their preparation and implementation must be careful, thorough, and aimed at long-term functionality.

Professor Deanoska-Trendafilova pointed out that there is a risk of reforms being perceived as the "greatest obligation" carried out under external pressure, rather than as an opportunity for real improvement of the judiciary and the prosecutor's office. She emphasized that the working groups have the task of developing legal solutions in an optimal manner, by identifying all weaknesses, providing constructive recommendations, and incorporating international standards, in order to avoid long transition periods and legal uncertainty.

Special emphasis was placed on disciplinary procedures within the prosecutor's office, which, according to her, must be clearly regulated, efficient, and free from political and institutional influences. She explained that disciplinary responsibility must not be relativized or reduced to a formality, but must be applied only in cases of the most serious violations, with clearly defined levels and procedures. In that context, she stressed the need for functional disciplinary commissions and the introduction of deadlines, because any delay leads to statute of limitations and undermines trust in the system.

In her presentation, Deanoska-Trendafilova also referred to the positive assessments of the Venice Commission, particularly regarding the increase in legal certainty and the strengthening of institutional guarantees for the independence of the prosecutor's office. She elaborated in detail on the proposed solutions for the selection and role of the public prosecutor, emphasizing that the goal is to minimize party influence and establish a balance between constitutional institutions. According to her, a clear separation of competencies is needed, which will ensure both independence and accountability of the prosecutor's office.

She emphasized that the proposed model envisages a strengthened role of the Council of Public Prosecutors as a filter for candidates, thereby providing additional protection from political influences, while at the same time maintaining the constitutional framework. This approach, as she pointed out, is in accordance with European recommendations and comparative practice, and represents an attempt to find a "middle solution" between the different models of organising prosecutorial authority.

In conclusion, Deanoska-Trendafilova emphasized that the true test of reforms will not be their adoption, but their consistent and quality implementation. According to her, the responsibility now lies with the institutions to demonstrate that they are capable not only of passing good laws, but also of applying them in practice, in the interest of the rule of law and citizens' trust.

"Judicial reforms must not be seen as an imposed obligation, but as an opportunity to finally build an efficient, independent, and trustworthy legal system that serves the citizens."



Bojana BOSILKOVA

Ministry of Justice, Head of the
Negotiations and Integration
Department

Bojana Bosilkova, Head of the Negotiations and Integration Department at the Ministry of Justice, in her presentation focused on the practical, "other side of the rhetoric" of the reform process – implementation. She expressed gratitude to the National Convention for the opportunity to address the event and emphasized that her goal is to provide a clear overview of where the state actually stands in the implementation of the reform agenda in the area of the rule of law.

Bosilkova recalled that the European Commission's Report on North Macedonia's progress was recently published, with assessments that are well known to the public, but stressed that the analysis of the situation should not be reduced solely to this document. She pointed to the significance of the Rule of Law Report, which for the second time covers the Western Balkan countries and offers a more detailed and comprehensive overview of the status of reforms, in contrast to the general conclusions in the annual progress report.

A central part of her presentation was the reform agenda as a new mechanism of the European Union, in which the Ministry of Justice has a coordinating role. She openly noted that the process is still underway according to the principle of "learning by doing," whereby institutions simultaneously learn and implement. In the rule of law section, the reform agenda encompasses a series of concrete steps: strengthening judicial integrity through revision of procedures for the selection, promotion, and dismissal of judges and prosecutors, implementing an action plan for the fight against corruption in the judiciary, improving the regulatory framework for the Judicial Council, digitalization of case management, as well as strengthening capacities for prosecuting organized crime and corruption and for the recovery and management of confiscated assets.

Bosilkova informed that in the past period, the Ministry of Justice has prepared a significant set of laws, some of which are already in government procedure, while others will soon enter parliamentary procedure. She singled out as particularly significant the Law on the Judicial Council, which is aligned with the recommendations of the EU assessment mission and the Venice Commission and contains improved provisions for the selection, accountability, and disciplinary procedure for judges, as well as for the right to appeal.

She emphasized that all key legal solutions are shared with the Venice Commission and the European Commission, in order for the process to be transparent and aligned with European standards.

Special emphasis was placed on the financial independence of the judiciary and the public prosecutor's office. Bosilkova pointed out that the staffing and financial crisis, noted also in the European Commission reports, represents a serious challenge for the implementation of reforms. Although the package of laws on salaries in the judiciary and prosecutor's office has been halted, the Ministry of Justice is working on a new Law on the Judicial Budget, which should enable autonomous and independent financial management.

In conclusion, she also referred to the broader context of EU enlargement, pointing out that recent movements, especially the example of Albania, show that European integration is achievable and real. According to her, North Macedonia has the capacity and readiness for rapid opening and closing of clusters if the negotiation process is unblocked, provided that reforms continue with the same dynamics.

"Reforms will not be measured by how many laws we have passed, but by how consistently and qualitatively we implement them in practice."

Entela SALIU

European Integration Sector,
Ministry of Internal Affairs



In her address, Entela Saliu, representative of the European Integration Sector at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, emphasized the central role of the rule of law as the foundation of the European project and a key prerequisite for progress in accession negotiations. She presented the key reform steps undertaken in Albania, especially in the domain of the fight against organized crime and the strengthening of institutional capacities.

Significant achievements highlighted included the adoption of the law on the confiscation of assets acquired through criminal offenses, the development of the National Strategy for the Fight against Organized Crime 2026–2030, as well as the strategy for small and light weapons and explosives, aligned with European Union standards. Additionally, the new Criminal Code enables alignment with 14 EU directives, covering areas such as human trafficking, money laundering, illegal weapons, and asset confiscation.

Regarding the European Commission for 2025, it was pointed out that the challenges related to Chapter 24 remain significant, especially in the area of human resources, inter-institutional cooperation, and the effective implementation of strategies. In that regard, a clear call was made for enhanced cooperation, better planning, and shared regional commitment to European values.

The conference once again confirmed that the European integration process requires not only legislative changes, but also continuous political and institutional engagement, based on partnership, transparency, and mutual support among the countries of the region.

"The rule of law is not only a European condition, but a shared obligation for stronger institutions, greater security, and citizen trust."



Duško LOPANDIĆ

Vice-President of the European Movement of Serbia, Professor and former Ambassador of Serbia to the European Union

Duško Lopandić, Vice-President of the European Movement of Serbia, professor and former ambassador of Serbia to the European Union, emphasized that the issue of the rule of law, the legal state, and the application of laws is one of the most current issues for the region. He stressed that European integration must not remain at the level of declarative messages, but must be measured through concrete implementation of reforms and institutional responsibility.

He recalled that Serbia and Montenegro in 2018 were considered leaders in the EU accession process, but that today the situation has changed significantly. In recent years, Serbia has not opened new clusters or chapters, and reform obligations are not being fulfilled. According to him, Serbia has failed to secure access to funds from the Growth Plan and the reform agenda, except for the initial financial support.

Lopandić assessed that the state is in a deep political and social crisis, marked by the dominance of the executive branch over the parliament and the judiciary. He emphasized that the assessments of domestic experts and the European Commission reports coincide in the conclusion that Serbia is experiencing stagnation, and in certain areas even regression in the rule of law.

Special attention was paid to the tragedy in Novi Sad, where 16 people died during the collapse of a reconstructed roof structure at the railway station.

Lopandić pointed to this accident as a symbol of systemic corruption, poor governance, and institutional irresponsibility, which caused massive protests, a decline in trust in institutions, and a strong anti-corruption sentiment in the public. He warned that Serbia today represents an example of a "captured state," but also of a "captured European integration process." According to him, the growing euroscepticism among young people is a result of the impression that the European process is blocked and that the EU tolerates undemocratic practices. Additionally, the concept of "destabilocracy" – rule through creating instability – has led to internal and regional insecurity.

Regarding the judiciary, Lopandić pointed out that a significant portion of the population does not believe in the independence of the judiciary, which is among the lowest levels in Europe. He emphasized that without independent judges and prosecutors there is no real fight against corruption, because otherwise institutions remain susceptible to political pressures and misuse of public resources.

He also warned of serious problems with media freedom, emphasizing that a large part of the public media space is under the control of the executive branch. According to him, such a situation undermines democratic debate, distorts public perception, and further reduces citizens' trust in institutions and in European values.

In conclusion, Lopandić conveyed that Serbia needs genuine independence of the judiciary, effective anti-corruption mechanisms, free media, and a restoration of trust in the European perspective. He called for greater dialogue with young people and the activation of civil society, in order for Europeanization to return to the right path.

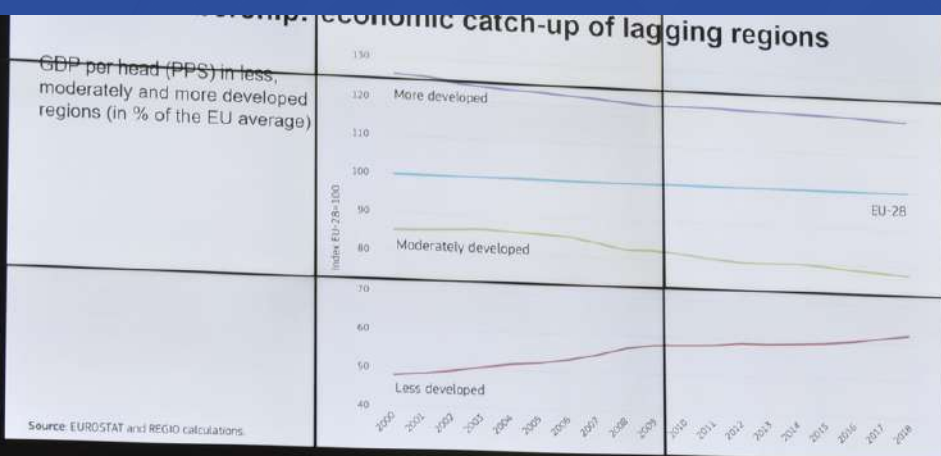
"It is not only the state that is captured, but the very process of European integration in Serbia is captured."

Vladimir MILOŠEVIKI

Public Prosecutor at the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office Skopje



In his address, Vladimir Miloševski, Public Prosecutor at the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Skopje, addressed the gap between the digital reality of modern crime and the analog way of functioning of the judicial system. He emphasized that, despite the continuous recommendations of the European Commission for digitalization, e-justice, and modernization of criminal procedure, in practice evidence is still most often presented on paper, with minimal use of digital tools.



According to Miloševski, crime has long ceased to recognize physical borders, time zones, or national jurisdictions. Electronic communications are global, and the internet enables fraud and criminal acts that are carried out transnationally, often without the victims or institutions being aware of it. He pointed out that modern electronic devices, especially smartphones, are not merely means of communication, but complex digital platforms with enormous capacity for storage, transfer, and modification of data.

Special attention was paid to the emergence of deepfake technology, which enables manipulation of voice, video, and digital identity, creating false testimonies, fraudulent corporate orders, and fictitious digital personas. Miloševski emphasized that such phenomena were not foreseen by the existing, predominantly analog legislation, which creates serious gaps in criminal law protection.

In that context, he referred to the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime (the so-called Budapest Convention), which the Republic of North Macedonia ratified back in 2005. According to him, although the convention was adopted over two decades ago, it still represents a key legal basis for the fight against cybercrime, especially through its additional protocols that enable international legal assistance, joint investigative teams, and the collection of digital evidence through internet service providers.

Miloševski emphasized that financial investigations are an inseparable part of modern criminal proceedings, but that in this segment as well, the judiciary faces serious challenges. Fiat money is increasingly being replaced by cryptocurrencies, electronic wallets, and complex transaction schemes, while procedural laws still do not recognize terms such as "mixer," fragmented payment, or specific models of crypto-transfers.

He stressed that digitalization does not mean only the collection of electronic evidence, but also its effective use in court proceedings. Presenting evidence through outdated media, physically carrying voluminous documentation, and technical limitations in courtrooms slow down the procedure and reduce its efficiency. As a solution, Miloševski proposed electronic case files, digital exchange with the defense, the use of search tools, as well as voice-to-text technologies for transcripts, with the aim of significantly speeding up and more efficiently conducting proceedings.

In conclusion, Miloševski emphasized that the need for digital transformation of the judiciary is no longer a matter of choice, but of necessity.

Only through aligning procedural laws with technological reality and through full utilization of international legal instruments will institutions be able to keep pace with modern criminal structures and ensure efficient and fair proceedings.

"We cannot speak of true rule of law if crime functions digitally, while the judiciary remains stuck in an analog mode."

Nenad SAVESKI

Judge in the Department for
Organized Crime and
Corruption, Basic Criminal Court,
Skopje



Nenad Saveski, Judge in the Department for Organized Crime and Corruption at the Basic Criminal Court in Skopje, highlighted the direct connection between the financial independence of the judiciary, independent judging, and the rule of law. According to him, a strong and independent judiciary cannot exist without adequate and stable financial support, which is a prerequisite for the realization of democratic values.

Savevski emphasized that financial independence does not refer exclusively to the material status of judges, but also to the judicial service, which he described as the "lifeblood of the judicial system." Without a skilled, motivated, and professional judicial administration, one cannot expect efficient, swift, and quality delivery of justice, nor the achievement of European standards in the judiciary.

He pointed out that the responsibility for ensuring these standards is shared and requires functional cooperation between the judicial, executive, and legislative branches. Although the judiciary must contribute and accept responsibility for improving results, without adequate legislative and executive support, it is not possible to fully achieve the expected results, especially in the fight against corruption and organized crime.

It was emphasized in the address that the fight against serious crime cannot be waged with weak and financially undervalued institutions, especially when criminal structures possess significant resources. According to Savevski, improving the financial situation and autonomy of the judiciary is not a privilege for the institutions, but a necessity in the interest of citizens and their trust in justice.

In conclusion, Saveski emphasized that every attack on the independence and reputation of the judiciary represents a direct blow to citizens' trust. Restoring that trust, through efficient, timely, and visible justice, is an obligation of the entire system and a key prerequisite for meeting European standards and the state's progress on the path to the European Union.

"You cannot fight with poor institutions when you are facing wealthy criminal structures."



Slobodan IVANOVSKI

Director, Financial Police
Administration, North
Macedonia

Slobodan Ivanovski, Director of the Financial Police Administration of North Macedonia, emphasized the need for deep and substantive reforms that begin with mentality and institutional culture, and not exclusively with formal legal amendments. According to him, political, security, and financial culture represent a fundamental prerequisite for any successful institutional transformation and must be built as a shared social concept, beyond party divisions.

Ivanovski highlighted digitalization as a key priority for law enforcement bodies. The lack of fully digitalized and interconnected institutional databases, according to him, not only slows down work but also creates serious risks for compromising pre-investigation procedures. The use of paper correspondence and physical communication between institutions enables information leaks, especially in cases involving powerful and well-connected subjects.

He also pointed to the systemic problem of parallel proceedings by multiple institutions on the same case, which results in the waste of limited resources, loss of time, and reduced efficiency. As a possible way out, Ivanovski indicated the need for centralized records and better coordination, under the leadership of the public prosecutor's office as *dominus litis* in the pre-investigation and investigation phase, in order to avoid institutional overlap.

In his presentation, he strongly advocated for a culture of reasoned debate and acceptance of differing opinions within institutions. According to him, quality decision-making requires internal dialogue, clear vertical accountability, and management based on professionalism, rather than hierarchical formality. Digitalization and solving systemic problems, as he emphasized, must be the number one point on the institutional agenda.

Ivanovski devoted significant attention to the human dimension of financial investigations. He underscored that every criminal report directly affects the lives of individuals and their families, which is why the handling of cases must be extremely responsible, reasoned, and supported by solid evidence. Filing unfounded or poorly supported reports, according to him, represents a serious blow to human destinies and to trust in institutions.

In the formal part of his presentation, Ivanovski emphasized that "Europe is built at home" and that European standards are not an abstract political narrative, but an operational reality that requires discipline, coordination, and institutional symbiosis. The Financial Police Administration, as he stated, operates with a policy of zero tolerance toward financial crime and corruption, regardless of position, function, or political context.

He informed that in the past year, capacities for financial analysis have been strengthened, interoperability with other institutions has been improved, processes that had been conducted manually for decades have been digitalized, and institutional independence has been increased. These reforms, according to him, are not being implemented for the formal fulfillment of conditions, but for building a resilient and functional state.

As concrete results, Ivanovski stated that since his appointment, 46 criminal charges have been filed against 146 natural persons and 45 legal entities, with a total estimated damage and unlawful property gain of approximately 2.76 billion denars. He emphasized that the focus must be on quality, not quantity, that is, on complex cases with high financial impact and serious organized crime.

In conclusion, Ivanovski emphasized that integrity is a systemic value without which the European model cannot exist, and that the fight against corruption and financial crime is crucial for preventing institutional divergence from the European path. Only through responsible management of public funds and enhanced cooperation with European institutions can a stable, resilient, and trustworthy European Macedonia be built.

"Europe is not a political narrative – Europe is trust, and our task is to build it here, through institutions that deliver results."



Andrzej SADECKI

Head of the Central European
Department, Centre for Eastern
Studies, Warsaw

Andrzej Sadecki, Head of the Central European Department at the Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw, shared the experience of Central European countries with more than two decades of membership in the European Union. He emphasized that the 2004 enlargement brought significant economic convergence, although the process was not linear and was affected by global crises.

According to Sadecki, the Visegrad Group countries started at 30–40% of the EU GDP average, and today they reach 70–80%, with some already close to the European average. Key factors for this progress are access to the single market, cohesion funds, and regulatory stability, which have stimulated trade, investment, and integration into European supply chains. It was particularly noted that economic connectivity among Central European countries has increased manifold.

He also pointed to the concrete benefits: higher living standards, poverty reduction, lower unemployment, and significant infrastructure improvements. At the same time, Sadecki pointed out that the region still faces serious challenges – the transition to a higher value-added economy, green transition without deindustrialization, better transport connectivity, negative demographic trends, and increased security risks.

In conclusion, Sadecki emphasized that the experience of Central Europe shows that EU membership creates strong conditions for development and stability, but success largely depends on the capacity and responsibility of the states themselves to implement reforms and preserve the achieved benefits.

"The European Union is a necessary framework for rapid development, but it is not a magic solution – many of the challenges must be addressed at the national level."

Gilda RUSHI and Clea ÇAFERI

Independent Experts, Republic
of Albania



In their joint presentation, Gilda Rushi and Clea Çafari presented the Albanian judicial reform as a complex, politically sensitive, but necessary process, deeply connected to European integration, institutional transformation, and the restoration of citizens' trust in justice. They emphasized that the reform did not arise solely from distrust in the judicial system, but also from the need for the state to actively respond to systemic corruption and organized crime.

The reform process, which gained strong momentum after 2014 and culminated in constitutional and legal amendments in 2016, was the result of a rare political consensus between the government and the opposition, supported by citizens and the European Union. The reforms were not limited to the reorganization of existing institutions, but led to the creation of entirely new bodies in the judiciary and prosecutor's office, with clearly defined mandates, deadlines, and accountability mechanisms.

Central to the reform was the vetting process – a thorough screening of judges and prosecutors according to three pillars: property origin, professional competence, and integrity. According to the information presented, approximately 60% of those screened did not pass the process, which led to serious and unforeseen consequences: institutional blockages, staff shortages, non-functionality of courts and prosecutor's offices, and prolonged proceedings. These effects were further deepened by the delayed establishment of the new institutions, which were formally foreseen by law but actually began operating several years later.

In response to the crisis, the High Judicial Council was forced to introduce a new judicial map, with the merging of courts and reorganization of jurisdictions, in order to preserve citizens' access to justice. However, it was emphasized that these measures were not accompanied by sufficient financial and logistical resources, which further burdened the judicial infrastructure.

Special emphasis was placed on the establishment of the Special Prosecutor's Office against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) and the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), modeled after the FBI. An exceptionally strict, transparent, and merit-based recruitment process for investigators was presented, open not only to police officers but also to lawyers, economists, and IT experts – profiles crucial for modern financial and digital investigations.

Out of over 600 candidates, only 28 were selected in the first generation, after multi-phase testing, vetting, and four months of intensive training with support from the EU and the FBI.

Despite initial criticisms and complaints, the transparency of the process and the professional results led to high public trust. Today, SPAK is perceived as one of the most credible institutions in Albania, with investigators who were not part of the old structures and who work with a high degree of integrity and motivation. Additionally, the reform included a significant increase in judges' salaries – from around 1,000 euros in 2016 to approximately 3,500 euros after 2020 – as a preventive measure against corruption.

In conclusion, Rushi and Çafari emphasized that such deep reforms carry high short-term costs and institutional disruptions, but that in the long run they create an independent, depoliticized, and professional judiciary. European integration, according to them, is an important framework and incentive, but success depends on internal political will, institutional resilience, and the state's readiness to pay the price of genuine transformation.



Ambre MOCOR

Economist, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies

Ambre Mocor examined economic convergence from the perspective of territorial inequality – an issue that is becoming increasingly crucial for the European Union. She emphasized that development differences exist not only between member states, but also within the states themselves, which makes the cohesion debate more complex than the traditional East–West divide.

The EU is actively trying to reduce these inequalities through cohesion policy, in which approximately one third of the Union's total budget is invested. These funds contribute to the gradual convergence of less developed regions, but the process is not uniform. Certain moderately developed regions experience stagnation or relative decline, which creates a "geography of discontent" and is often associated with higher levels of euroscepticism.

In the context of North Macedonia, Mocor noted that the country as a whole registers a faster development trend compared to the EU average, but at the same time internal regional differences are deepening, especially between the Skopje region and the other regions. This, according to her, represents a serious concern for both national policies and the EU.

As a key response, she emphasizes the importance of cohesion policy within the enlargement process, particularly in relation to Chapter 22. North Macedonia, according to her, must more efficiently utilize the available European funds through stable administrative staff, functional decentralization, a strong financial framework for municipalities, and better coordination among institutions.

In conclusion, Mocor emphasizes that territorial cohesion is not a secondary, but a fundamental principle of the European Union. Enlargement should not be perceived as a risk, but as an opportunity – provided that states, citizens, and especially municipalities demonstrate capacity, readiness, and vision for the strategic use of European cohesion funds.

Nikola ALTIPARMAKOV

Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Economics, University of Belgrade, member of the Fiscal Council of Serbia



Nikola Altiparmakov focused on the long-term economic convergence of the countries in the region through a comparison of living standards in North Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania, measured by GDP per capita based on purchasing power parity. He pointed out that in 2000, all these countries were at approximately 25–30% of the EU average, while today noticeable progress is evident, but with significant differences among them.

North Macedonia has reached approximately 42% of the EU average, which indicates convergence, but also raises the question of whether the pace is sufficient. Serbia, with approximately 51%, has a better result, partly due to fiscal consolidation and increased public investments over the past decade. However, Altiparmakov emphasized that the slowdown in the EU accession process is accompanied by a slowdown in economic growth.

Particularly significant is the comparison between Serbia and Bulgaria, two countries of similar size with comparable reforms, where the key difference arises from Bulgaria's EU membership and access to the common market and European funds. An even clearer example is Romania, which has reached approximately 78% of the EU average, which Altiparmakov linked to better-implemented reforms in the rule of law and institutional development.

He emphasized that European integration is not an automatic process and that countries must "do their homework," especially in the context of the upcoming green transition.

The introduction of mechanisms related to the carbon footprint will represent a serious challenge for the energy systems of Serbia and North Macedonia, which risk becoming uncompetitive without timely investments and support.

"We must do our homework – EU membership is not only a political agreement, but an economic and institutional process."

In conclusion, Altiparmakov emphasized that all policies, reforms, and measures ultimately reflect in one key measure – the standard of living, that is, GDP per capita – as the clearest indicator of a country's real progress.



Dragan TEVDOVSKI

Expert at NKEU-MK, Professor at
the Faculty of Economics
UKIM, Skopje

Dragan Tevdovski addressed economic convergence and income development in the Western Balkan region, with an emphasis on North Macedonia in comparison with Bulgaria and Romania. In his presentation, he highlighted the importance of analyzing GDP per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity, as a measure of a country's true economic position in relation to neighboring countries and the European Union average.

Tevdovski emphasized that, although there is talk of income convergence, the data show the opposite – there is income divergence between countries that are not EU members and those that joined in 2007. He cited the example of Bulgaria and Romania: in 2007, GDP per capita in North Macedonia was about 24% lower than Bulgaria and 30% lower than Romania. By 2024, these differences had increased to 37% and 46% respectively, which clearly indicates that Macedonia's lag is not only not decreasing, but is increasing.

One of the key factors for this divergence is access to EU cohesion funds. EU member states, such as Bulgaria and Romania, receive significantly greater funding through cohesion funds, while Western Balkan countries are limited to IPA programs, which provide fewer funds relative to their GDP. Tevdovski emphasized that, while IPA funds are useful for supporting development projects and infrastructure, they cannot compensate for the financial effect of full EU membership, which provides long-term stability and development support.

Additionally, Tevdovski emphasized the importance of economic power as the foundation for the national strategic position. According to him, GDP is not only an indicator of the standard of living, but also a measure of the economic and strategic strength of the state:

"If GDP does not move as it should in comparison with other countries, it means that we are calling into question, ultimately, the very survival of the state."

Tevdovski pointed out that economic weakness limits the state's capacity to participate equally in international relations and to ensure the competitiveness of the domestic economy. He emphasized that in order to address this dynamic, it is necessary to implement structural and fiscal reforms, not only because of the EU accession process, but above all for strengthening domestic capacity and the state's ability to independently manage the economy and resources.

In the context of regional experiences, Tevdovski compared the development of North Macedonia with Serbia, which used successful fiscal consolidation to stimulate public investments. He emphasized that the successful use of financial resources, whether through investments, grants, or loans, is directly linked to the state's ability to increase its economic capacity and competitiveness.

Tevdovski's conclusion was clear: economic development, improvement of GDP per capita, and strategic economic power are not only indicators of the standard of living, but key elements for the survival and stability of the state. He emphasized that the implementation of reforms and the strategic use of financial and human resources are necessary to prevent further divergence and to ensure sustainable development of North Macedonia in a regional and European context.





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LET JUSTICE RULE THE REGION



Европско движење Северна Македонија
European Movement North Macedonia



SFPA
Slovak Foreign Policy Association



Mileva DJUROVSKA

National Coordinator of NKEU-MK, President of the European Movement in the Republic of North Macedonia

Professor Mileva Djurovska opened the fourth expert meeting within the framework of the project "Let Justice Rule the Region," highlighting the continuity and growing maturity of regional cooperation between partner organizations from North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania. She emphasized that, in addition to long-standing professional connections, the initiative has fostered new partnerships and trust, confirming the value of sustainable regional dialogue.

Djurovska noted that the three-year project cycle passed faster than expected, precisely because cooperation evolved from individual activities into a strategic, regionally relevant engagement. She assessed that this momentum creates appropriate conditions for deepening partnerships and advancing more substantive joint initiatives, especially in the context of EU enlargement and the central role of the rule of law.

Positioning enlargement within current geopolitical and economic realities, she emphasized that the European Union has clearly reaffirmed enlargement as a priority. For the Western Balkans, she said, this represents a real "window of opportunity," strengthened by the EU Growth Plan, which accelerates reforms, introduces constructive regional competition, and redefines accession as a results-driven political process, not merely as pure policy.

"This is the true momentum for EU enlargement with the Western Balkans, where accession is no longer just policy, but policy that demands concrete results."



Пјер Вирџилио ДАСТОЛИ

Претседател на Европското движење во Италија

Pier Virgilio Dastoli, President of the European Movement in Italy, addressed the conference via video link, apologizing for his absence, while reaffirming his strong commitment to regional cooperation and promising to personally attend the next National Convention.

Speaking from the perspective of both the Italian and the international European Movement, he underscored that the initiative "Let Justice Rule the Region" resonates far beyond the Western Balkans.

Dastoli expanded the framework of the discussion by arguing that justice is not only a regional or national concern, but a continental one. For the European Movement, he emphasized, there can be no peace or democracy in Europe without justice, positioning the rule of law as the core of the normative foundation of the European project.

He stressed that the rule of law is not only an internal matter for candidate countries, but a binding task for EU member states as well. Although accession is conditional upon meeting the Copenhagen criteria, including respect for the rule of law, Dastoli warned that shortcomings in existing member states undermine the credibility of enlargement. He cited recent monitoring missions of the European Parliament and expressed concern over political resistance to oversight, including in Italy.

Referring to the latest European Commission report on enlargement, Dastoli highlighted three strategic priorities. First, he rejected the false dilemma between deepening and widening the Union, arguing that both processes must proceed in parallel. A larger Europe, he said, must also be more integrated and more democratic, noting that previous enlargements often outpaced institutional deepening.

Second, he advocated for internal EU reforms and a model of gradual integration. According to this approach, candidate countries should progressively integrate into EU policies and structures as negotiating chapters are closed, rather than waiting until full membership. This, according to him, would make enlargement more tangible and credible.

The third and most critical issue, according to Dastoli, is communication with public opinion. He warned that the current EU communication strategies on enlargement are insufficient and risk alienating citizens both in member states and in candidate countries. The exclusion of candidate countries from key participatory processes, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, according to him, is a serious strategic mistake.

He concluded by emphasizing the essential role of civil society and political actors in fostering informed public debate. Stronger communication tools, greater involvement of candidate countries, and closer cooperation among European movements are, as he argued, necessary to ensure democratic legitimacy and public support for accession processes.



Hristina KONESKA BEROVSKA

State Advisor at the Ministry of
European Affairs of the Republic
of North Macedonia

Hristina Koneska Berovska, State Advisor at the Ministry of European Affairs of North Macedonia, framed her intervention around the visibility, credibility, and institutional ownership of reform processes. She emphasized that continuous work in public administration yields results only if it is clearly communicated to the public and grounded in trust between institutions and society.

Referring to the current phase of EU accession, Koneska Berovska noted that the end of the year offers a clear analytical overview through multiple EU reports and monitoring mechanisms. These assessments, according to her, enable governments and regional partners to identify both progress and persistent shortcomings, especially in the areas of inter-institutional coordination and regional cooperation.

She highlighted the EU Growth Plan and the Reform Agenda for the Western Balkans as a decisive new instrument, introduced in 2023 and operationalized in 2024. In its essence, she explained, the Growth Plan – like the accession methodology itself – places fundamental values and the rule of law as non-negotiable prerequisites. Without measurable progress in this area, reforms in other sectors lose their substance.

Koneska Berovska underscored that the enlargement process is currently experiencing a rare momentum, marked by clearer timelines and expectations. This, she said, has not been the case since the accession of Romania and Bulgaria. This moment creates opportunities, but at the same time sharpens competition and accountability across the entire region.

Making a comparative regional overview, she pointed to Montenegro as the most advanced candidate, which has met key benchmarks in Chapters 23 and 24. Albania, she added, has shown how the revised methodology can accelerate negotiations, opening all clusters in a short period of time, while simultaneously advancing with judicial vetting and rule of law reforms.

Regarding North Macedonia, she emphasized that the country possesses a solid level of preparedness, but warned that progress cannot be sustained without effective implementation. Challenges remain in the efficiency of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, and organized crime – areas that directly condition progress in negotiations.

She also warned that stalled reforms carry tangible consequences, citing Serbia as an example where delays in rule of law reforms have already affected access to Growth Plan funds. Similar institutional challenges, she noted, continue to slow progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as well.

In conclusion, Koneska Berovska assessed that tangible and sustainable progress depends on close cooperation between institutions, consistent implementation of reforms, and transparent communication with civil society and the broader public. Only through broad consensus, she concluded, can accession reforms regain their momentum and credibility.

"Without genuine reforms in the rule of law, it is as if nothing else has been done in the accession process."

Bojana SELAKOVIĆ

National Coordinator, National
Convention on the European
Union in Serbia



Bojana Selaković, National Coordinator of the National Convention for the EU in Serbia, candidly reflected on the past three years of regional cooperation, choosing to speak in Serbian in order to convey her assessment as authentically as possible. She presented the project "Let Justice Rule the Region" as a useful reference point for evaluating how Serbia, the region, and the EU enlargement policy have changed – and in some aspects failed to change – over time.

Acknowledging the existence of a new geopolitical momentum for enlargement, Selaković warned that this moment has not been sufficiently prepared for or accompanied by domestic reforms. Serbia, which was once considered a frontrunner in EU integration, has entered a phase in which its credibility has eroded, while domestic developments increasingly shape regional perceptions and external criticisms.

She described a sharp contrast between Serbia's former status as a leader in preparedness and its current position, citing the recent enlargement forum in Brussels where Serbia was publicly criticized and politically stigmatized. For civil society actors who invested years in supporting accession reforms, she said, this turnaround is neither trivial nor abstract – it reflects the cumulative cost of stalled reforms and ignored recommendations.

Selaković pointed to a fundamental paradox: while civil society consistently expressed concern about corruption, human rights, electoral conditions, and media freedom, these demands were dismissed or politicized. Instead of accelerating reforms, the lack of political will produced polarization, weakened dialogue, and created an environment where reform agendas exist mainly on paper.

She warned that formal instruments, such as the EU Growth Plan and national reform agendas, risk becoming tools for simulating progress rather than delivering genuine change. In Serbia's case, she argued, financial incentives too often maintained the illusion of reforms while implementation remains blocked by captured institutions and political domination.

In response to this, the National Convention for the EU in Serbia has taken a firm stance: careful monitoring of government activities, clear definition of "red lines," and direct communication with EU institutions. Selaković emphasized that civil society refuses to legitimize reforms that exist only to unlock funds, without addressing structural problems, especially in media freedom and the independence of regulatory bodies.

Despite the difficult circumstances, she stressed that the National Convention remains one of the most organized and consistent pro-European actors in Serbia. Its role, according to her, is to prevent the normalization of stagnation and to insist that rule of law benchmarks cannot be bypassed, even under geopolitical pressure to "keep enlargement moving."

She concluded with a warning that if accountability is not established and genuine dialogue is not restored, Serbia risks a deeper crisis in the accession process. Enlargement, she emphasized, cannot succeed if it tolerates simulated reforms at the expense of democratic substance.

"We are facing a dangerous illusion of reforms — on paper they exist, but in reality they are not being implemented."

Aleksandar KRZHALOVSKI

Executive Director, MCMS



Aleksandar Krzhalovski, Executive Director of the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCMS), offered a deliberately broad and reflective intervention, basing his remarks on nearly three decades of professional engagement in European integration processes. Describing himself as a "well-informed optimist," he warned that experience has made him increasingly skeptical about how merits and progress are interpreted in practice.

Krzhalovski challenged the long-standing narrative that EU enlargement is driven primarily by objective, technical criteria. In reality, he argued, enlargement decisions have always been political, shaped by strategic interests and consensus among member states, not merely by strict adherence to benchmarks.

He reminded participants that several EU member states were admitted through political decisions despite incomplete fulfillment of accession criteria. Against this background, he suggested that the next phase of enlargement will inevitably be even more political, especially if the EU wants to maintain its relevance and influence in an increasingly competitive global order.

From this perspective, Krzhalovski proposed that the EU consider a comprehensive political decision to advance the accession of the entire group of candidate countries — including Ukraine and Moldova — within a defined timeframe. Although he acknowledged that such a move would require a departure from established rules, he argued that geopolitical realities may demand precisely this kind of strategic shift.

At the same time, he expressed doubt about the realism of this scenario, noting the persistent resistance from certain member states that continue to block progress through technical objections. The uneven duration of negotiations — ranging from decades in some cases to rapid progress in others — only reinforces the political nature of enlargement, he said.

Krzhalovski pointed to Albania's accelerated negotiations as evidence that speed is possible when there is political will, contrasting this with countries that remain stuck for years. The average negotiation period of six years, he noted, has become more of an exception than the rule.

Placing enlargement in the broader global context, he warned that the EU faces growing competition from forces ready to act faster and more decisively. In such an environment, hesitation and procedural rigidity could weaken Europe's strategic position.

He concluded by arguing that the current constellation of international forces creates a rare opportunity for the EU to take a bold political step forward. Whether Brussels is ready to do so, he suggested, remains an open and decisive question.

"Enlargement has never been purely technical — it has always been a political decision, and the next round will be even more so."



Ermelinda MUÇAJ

Project Coordinator, European Movement in Albania

Ermelinda Muçaj, Project Officer at the European Movement in Albania, approached enlargement through the dual lens of deepening and widening, starting with the structural evolution of the EU's enlargement policy itself. She argued that the EU, traditionally a normative power, is increasingly shifting toward geopolitical logic, driven by global power competition and subsequent crises.

Muçaj emphasized that although the EU has faced multiple crises over time, Russia's aggression against Ukraine marked a turning point that directly accelerated the enlargement discourse. This change, she explained, redefines enlargement from a technocratic process into a strategic necessity, accompanied by debates on institutional adjustment and stronger coordination among member states.

At the same time, she pointed to persistent structural constraints within the EU, particularly the veto power of individual member states. Directing attention to existing treaty provisions, she highlighted discussions about moving from unanimity to qualified majority voting for certain decisions, without formal treaty change, as one of the possible ways to unblock enlargement-related stalemates.

She also referred to new ideas such as "probationary" membership or observer status for candidate countries, which would allow them to participate in EU structures before full accession. Such approaches, according to her, could help candidates better understand institutional functioning, while simultaneously maintaining incentives for completing reforms.

Referring to Albania's experience, Muçaj emphasized the impact of the revised accession methodology adopted in 2020. Under this framework, Albania opened all negotiating clusters within just over a year, marking one of the fastest advancements in the region. Key to this progress, she stressed, was the comprehensive judicial reform, including the vetting process for judicial actors.

However, she warned that maintaining these gains requires continuous integrity checks, stronger inter-institutional cooperation, and a shift toward systemic accountability. Implementation, she argued, must combine "top-down" reforms with "bottom-up" engagement to ensure sustainability and public trust.

From a civil society perspective, Muçaj highlighted the consultative platforms in Albania that enable NGOs and citizens to contribute to policy-making and legislative changes. However, she warned that transparency depends on whether recommendations are actually taken into account, calling for stronger monitoring and feedback mechanisms.

She concluded by emphasizing the importance of institutionalized dialogue between the EU and civil society, citing the new consultative structures between Albania and European institutions as a major step forward. At the regional level, she called for broader cooperation that includes Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, arguing that enlargement must remain merit-based, but also sensitive to the different post-conflict and institutional contexts.

"Enlargement today is no longer just a normative process — it has become a strategic and geopolitical necessity."

Sajma ADEMOVIĆ

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, University "Donja Gorica", Montenegro



Sajma Ademović, from the University of Donja Gorica in Montenegro, directed her intervention toward the connection between the speed of reforms, geopolitical shifts, and the renewed political will for enlargement within the European Union. Speaking in Montenegrin, she emphasized that Montenegro's current leading position in the accession process is largely the result of progress achieved only in the last year — a dynamic that, as she noted, mirrors that of Albania as well.

Ademović argues that the acceleration of reforms cannot be understood without placing them in a broader geopolitical context. Faced with growing global instability and security threats, the EU revived enlargement not only because of the progress of candidate countries, but also because of its own strategic needs. As a result, integration is increasingly driven by political considerations alongside technical benchmarks.

She highlighted the European Commission's 2025 progress report for Montenegro as the most positive the country has received since the start of negotiations. Montenegro has advanced in 18 out of 33 chapters, with the strongest results recorded in Chapters 23 and 24 on the rule of law — areas that condition progress across the entire negotiating framework.

A key milestone, she explained, was the positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR), which signaled that Montenegro had met a significant number of rule of law standards. After receiving the IBAR, Montenegro closed several additional chapters, illustrating a clear break from the slow pace that characterized the earlier phases of the process.

However, Ademović warned that progress remains vulnerable to bilateral political disputes. She pointed to Croatia's blockade of Chapter 31, despite Montenegro's technical readiness, as evidence that unresolved historical and political tensions in the region continue to affect accession paths. Such blockades, she warned, could significantly shape Montenegro's prospects ahead of the target year 2027.

She also drew attention to public opinion trends, noting a strong correlation between reform momentum and citizens' trust in the EU. As reforms accelerated, trust in the EU in Montenegro rose above 50 percent for the first time in many years, in contrast to the decline in trust in countries where accession processes remain stalled.

Ademović further analyzed EU-level debates on differentiated integration, including proposals to limit voting rights for new member states during transitional periods. While some view this as pragmatism, she warned that such approaches risk creating first- and second-class membership, undermining the Union's fundamental principles.

She concluded that enlargement is now shaped as much by political will within the EU as by reforms in candidate countries. Recent progress, according to her, shows that enlargement is once again a real and credible policy — but only insofar as the EU maintains its internal reform momentum and resists the fragmentation of membership rights.

Stefan GOJKOVIĆ

President of the Association of
Judicial Assistants, Republic of
Serbia



Stefan Gojković, President of the Association of Judicial Assistants of the Republic of Serbia, described Serbia as a country in a prolonged political and institutional crisis, marked by a decline in trust in institutions, deep polarization, and constant uncertainty. The way out of this situation, according to him, is impossible without establishing unconditional and credible rule of law.

Gojković emphasized that the rule of law is not a procedural requirement or a rhetorical condition for EU integration, but the foundation of democratic legitimacy and Serbia's European future. At its core, he said, lies an independent and transparent judiciary — an area in which Serbia continues to face serious shortcomings.

Referring to the latest European Commission progress report, he emphasized that long-standing concerns regarding the independence of the judiciary remain unresolved, and in some cases have intensified. Attacks on judges and prosecutors continue, while the institutions responsible for defending judicial independence have failed to respond adequately, further weakening public trust.

He also pointed to structural problems in the judiciary, including delayed appointments, unfilled vacancies, and irregular procedures for the selection of members of judicial and prosecutorial councils. These processes, he stressed, should be led by judges and prosecutors themselves, not under the influence of executive or legislative interests.

Beyond institutional design, Gojković also criticized the legislative process, warning that laws are increasingly being adopted without transparency or substantive public debate. Critical legislation, including amendments to the Criminal Code, was passed through expedited procedures that formally exist but function only symbolically, undermining democratic standards.

In conclusion, he highlighted the systematic exclusion of civil society from reform processes, including in areas directly affecting judicial assistants. Despite the difficult conditions, he noted that civil society organizations have shown growing cohesion and professionalism, gaining increased public trust — a resource he described as essential for preserving the rule of law.

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"Without an independent judiciary, the rule of law becomes an empty phrase instead of the foundation of democracy."



Bojana BOSILKOVA

Ministry of Justice, Head of the
Negotiations and Integration
Department

Bojana Bosilkova, Head of the Negotiations and Integration Sector at the Ministry of Justice, framed her intervention as a realistic portrayal of where North Macedonia stands in translating reform obligations into practice.

Although she acknowledged the cautious tone of previous speakers, she emphasized that EU integration is no longer abstract, but is unfolding through mechanisms of gradual and phased integration that are already available to candidate countries.

She explained that, regardless of the formal phase of negotiations, North Macedonia is increasingly participating in EU programs that are traditionally reserved for member states. Over the past year, institutions, civil society, and the academic community gained access to initiatives such as the "Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values" program, with the expectation of next joining the "Justice Program." In parallel, the country participates as an observer in EU anti-corruption networks and in the Fundamental Rights Agency, signaling tangible integration in the domain of the rule of law.

Bosilkova highlighted the EU Growth Plan as a decisive turning point from planning to execution. By the end of 2024, all procedural and legislative prerequisites were adopted, enabling implementation to begin in 2025. The rule of law, she emphasized, is one of the key pillars of this agenda and directly conditions access to EU funds, making the implementation of reforms both politically and financially significant.

She outlined the key reform priorities: strengthening integrity mechanisms in judicial appointments and promotions, revising the foundational legislation in accordance with Venice Commission recommendations, upgrading case management systems, improving asset confiscation frameworks, and strengthening institutional capacities in the fight against corruption and organized crime. These reforms, she stressed, are interconnected and require systemic, rather than selective, implementation.

At the same time, Bosilkova acknowledged the critical challenges identified by the European Commission. The stalemate in filling judicial vacancies, insufficient long-term human resource planning, and disruptions in judicial training — further exacerbated by local elections, staff shortages, and financial constraints — have slowed progress. The Commission, she noted, expects sustainable solutions, not short-term fixes.

In response, the Ministry of Justice is preparing structural measures, including new laws on the Judicial Council, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the judicial budget, aimed at strengthening independence, accountability, and financial autonomy. Several of these laws have already received positive opinions from the Venice Commission and have entered parliamentary procedure.

She also emphasized the work on the new Criminal Code and the subsequent alignment of the Criminal Procedure Code with EU directives, especially in areas such as asset confiscation, domestic violence, and environmental crime. These reforms, she said, reflect a deeper alignment with EU law, not just partial amendments.

In conclusion, Bosilkova underscored that the implementation of reforms is proceeding transparently and in co-operation with civil society. Representatives of non-governmental organizations are included in the working groups, and regular dialogue is maintained through institutionalized cooperation mechanisms. Despite objective limitations, she assessed that the reform trajectory remains active and measurable.

"Rule of law reforms are no longer plans on paper — they are benchmarks tied to funding, accountability, and genuine implementation."



Clea ÇAFERI

Independent Expert, Republic of Albania

Clea Çafëri: Albania's path to EU integration has gone beyond political ambitions, taking concrete steps to build an impartial and independent judicial system. Judicial reform became a priority in 2014, culminating in 2016 with the approval of the comprehensive justice reform package. This legislation introduced new institutions, amended the criminal and civil procedure codes, and set deadlines to ensure timely trials.

The reforms aimed to empower citizens with mechanisms to protect their right to a fair trial. However, the simultaneous implementation of the vetting process, which evaluated judges and prosecutors, created significant challenges. Over 60% of magistrates did not pass the vetting process, leaving key institutions, such as the Constitutional Court and the High Court, non-functional for more than two years and creating a backlog of tens of thousands of cases.

In response, the High Judicial Council, established by the reform, in partnership with the US State Department, developed a strategy to reduce the backlog. This included inventorying cases, prioritizing them, and subsequently consolidating courts to improve efficiency. Despite these efforts, some courts are now facing an even greater workload, with individual judges handling over 2,000 pending cases.

The Council's current strategy focuses on three areas: structural reduction of the backlog, strengthening institutional capacities, and modernization of judicial processes through digitalization and automation. Legislative proposals currently under consideration aim to improve the recruitment of legal advisors and enable experienced advisors to become judges, although these proposals have faced some scrutiny from the EU.

"Reforms are not easy, but they are necessary to provide citizens with impartial and independent justice, which is fundamental for Albania's EU integration."

Ivana PETKOVSKA

Legal Expert



Concerns about the protection of judges during disciplinary proceedings remain a pressing issue in Macedonia. Ivana Petkovska, a legal expert, emphasized that judges often face dismissal or disciplinary measures without clear explanations, raising questions about transparency and fairness. Together with a working group and with contributions from the Venice Commission, she explored ways to protect judges' rights within the existing legal frameworks.

Petkovska emphasized that administrative courts play a central role in protecting judges. Judges can file lawsuits to resolve administrative disputes, but implementation gaps persist. An analysis of 20 decisions of the Judicial Council and the Appeals Council revealed inconsistencies and systemic deficiencies, with some judges being removed from office while others faced no consequences for similar violations.

The research showed that inadequate explanations and the lack of uniformity in decisions undermine public trust. The many appeals by judges to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg confirmed violations of Article 6 of the Convention, highlighting the failures in ensuring protection of the right to a fair trial in the country.

Efforts are underway to establish a more consistent legal remedy through administrative courts. Petkovska emphasized the importance of well-documented, transparent decisions to protect judicial independence, while simultaneously maintaining public trust and the integrity of the system.

"The public deserves to understand why one judge is removed from office while another is not for the same violation, thereby ensuring trust in the judiciary."

Petkovska concluded that reforms must focus on clearer reasoning in the decisions of the Judicial Council and consistent application of disciplinary procedures. These measures are key to strengthening the integrity of judges and broader trust in Macedonia's judicial system.



**Aleksandra
DEANOSKA
TREDAFILOVA**

Coordinator of Working Group 3,
Professor, Faculty of Law
"Justinian I", Skopje

Aleksandra Deanoska Trendafilova, Coordinator of Working Group 3 and Professor at the Faculty of Law "Justinian I" in Skopje, framed her remarks around one central question: how successful are reforms when measured not by the number of laws passed, but by their real impact. Based on nearly ten years of participation in the National Convention, she emphasized the role of the academic community, civil society, and students in maintaining informed debate on EU-related reforms.

She stressed that the Convention's goal is not only technical alignment with EU law, but also initiating discussions on substantive priorities. Although many laws have been drafted and adopted, the visibility and effectiveness of reform results remain limited. According to Deanoska Trendafilova, political will exists, but the determination of priorities in the reform process is often unclear or inconsistent.

A key concern is the pace and sequencing of judicial reforms. She warned of the blocking or delaying of key legislation, especially the new Law on the Judicial Council, through its repeated and unfounded return to review. Accelerating adoption in key areas of the judiciary is necessary if tangible progress within EU integrations is to be achieved.

Referring to her long-standing engagement in criminal law reforms, Deanoska Trendafilova highlighted the problematic amendments to the Criminal Code adopted in September 2023. These amendments led to the statute of limitations for high-level corruption cases, coinciding with new EU anti-corruption directives. Although corrective amendments were proposed, they were never adopted, leaving constitutional intervention as the only viable remedy.

She warned that adopting an entirely new Criminal Code is not a quick solution. Even if it were passed, its application would be delayed for a year, meaning that systemic problems would persist in the meantime. Structural laws of this kind require gradual transition, careful planning, and complementary measures to ensure their effectiveness.

Attention was also paid to the composition and functioning of judicial governance bodies. Deanoska Trendafilova questioned vague legal terms such as "prominent legal expert" in the selection of members of the Judicial Council and the Council of Public Prosecutors, arguing that such ambiguity undermines transparency and consistency.

"Reforms are not measured by the number of laws passed, but by whether they produce visible and credible results in practice."

She presented proposals for strengthening prosecutorial independence, including transferring the appointment of the State Public Prosecutor from government initiative to the Council of Public Prosecutors, in accordance with the recommendations of the Venice Commission. Additionally, strict deadlines and clear sanctions for disciplinary procedures were proposed to prevent prolonged and unresolved cases that erode institutional credibility.

On the question of vetting, Deanoska Trendafilova remained cautious. She assessed that introducing new vetting mechanisms could be risky and politically abused, suggesting that instead, existing institutions and procedures should be used more effectively. At the end of her address, she emphasized the Convention's role as a platform for open debate, concrete proposals, and continuous engagement in shaping credible and sustainable judicial reform.

