



Research Article

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Reducing political polarization as a prerequisite for EU accession: The case of North Macedonia

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Abstract

Political polarization remains one of the most persistent obstacles to democratic consolidation and EU integration in North Macedonia. Despite notable progress in aligning legal frameworks with the EU acquis, the country's democratic institutions continue to suffer from deep-rooted partisan divides, weak institutional trust, and reform deadlock. This paper examines the causes and consequences of political polarization in North Macedonia, arguing that it undermines both domestic democratic resilience and the credibility of the EU accession process. It builds upon the theoretical framework of deliberative democracy especially the work of James Fishkin and the Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab that integrates empirical data from domestic civil society initiatives, including deliberative polling exercises conducted by the European Policy Institute (EPI). The analysis is based on the latest assessments from the European Commission, Freedom House, work of Western Balkans enlargement experts and local CSOs. Drawing on reports from 2024 and 2025, including the European Commission's Rule of Law Report, the paper identifies polarization as both a democratic deficit and a strategic obstacle to enlargement. It concludes with concrete recommendations to embed deliberative practices in institutional processes, strengthen cross-party cooperation, and enhance public trust in the EU integration agenda.

Keywords: Political polarization, EU accession, North Macedonia, deliberative democracy, institutional trust.

1. Introduction

The Republic of North Macedonia has long positioned itself as a dedicated candidate for EU membership. The country has implemented substantial constitutional and legal reforms, resolved its name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement, and aligned its foreign and security policy with that of the EU. Nevertheless, despite these advances and sacrifices, the accession process remains stalled, due not only to bilateral and geopolitical constraints but also to persistent internal challenges, most pressing the political polarization (Couteau et al., 2024; European Commission,

2024b).

Polarization in North Macedonia is deeply entrenched and multidimensional. It cuts across party lines, ethnic divisions, geographic cleavages, and increasing media ecosystems. According to *Nations in Transit* (Freedom House, 2024), political life is characterized by mutual delegitimization between ruling and opposition parties, obstructions in the Parliament, and contested institutional reforms. The 2024 Rule of Law Report by the European Commission echoes these concerns, citing the persistence of partisan conflict as a key barrier to effective governance and reform implementation (European Commission, 2024b). Similarly, the Couteau et al. (2024) analysis frames North Macedonia's polarized political environment as a structural impediment to EU-oriented transformation (Couteau et al., 2024).

This paper argues that polarization in North Macedonia is not merely a governance dysfunction but a systemic obstacle to democratic consolidation and sustainable EU integration. In line with the EU's revised enlargement methodology which places strong emphasis on fundamentals such as the rule of law, judicial reform, and functioning democratic institutions (European Commission, 2020) resolving internal political fragmentation is not a secondary concern, but a strategic prerequisite.

To address this challenge, the paper builds on the framework of deliberative democracy, particularly the work of James Fishkin and the Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab, which suggests that structured, informed, and inclusive deliberation can reduce polarization by fostering mutual understanding, institutional trust, and informed opinion shifts (Fishkin, 2018). These insights are not simply theoretical: in North Macedonia, deliberative polling initiatives implemented by the European Policy Institute (EPI), in cooperation with Stanford and supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), have demonstrated measurable outcomes. Participants consistently emerge from deliberative processes with greater openness to compromise and increased trust in democratic institutions (EPI, 2023, 2024a).

This paper integrates findings from these initiatives alongside recent empirical data from the European Commission, Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, the Regional Cooperation Council, and local civil society actors such as EPI, MCIC, IDSCS, and MHC. Through this lens, the paper analyzes the structural drivers of polarization, its impact on institutions and EU conditionality, and the transformative potential of deliberative democratic engagement.

The core argument is urgent yet straightforward: without significantly reducing political polarization, North Macedonia cannot credibly or sustainably fulfill the democratic requirements of EU membership.

2. Sources and Drivers of Political Polarization

Political polarization in North Macedonia is driven by a combination of historical, institutional, ethnic, and media-related factors. While some of these are common to other post-socialist democracies, their particular intensity and interaction in North Macedonia have generated a uniquely fragmented and adversarial political

landscape (Couteau et al., 2024; Freedom House, 2024). Understanding the origins and mechanisms of polarization is essential for designing effective depolarization strategies that support democratic resilience and EU accession.

2.1 Ethnic Fragmentation and Identity Politics

North Macedonia's institutional design, shaped by the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, has codified ethnic power-sharing mechanisms, which while crucial for peace and stability have also embedded ethnic identity as a primary axis of political mobilization. The 2024 Bertelsmann Transformation Index notes that ethnic segmentation in the party system "makes it difficult to foster issuebased competition," reinforcing voter alignment along identity rather than policy lines (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

The 2024 electoral cycle illustrated this dynamic clearly. Intensified nationalist rhetoric was particularly evident during the parliamentary elections, where the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE accused the ethnic Albanian party DUI of state capture and corruption, often framing these accusations through ethnically charged narratives (ODIHR, 2024). Hate speech monitoring by the Macedonian Helsinki Committee documented a significant spike in online and political hate speech surrounding the elections, with 69 cases recorded in January 2025 alone—most involving ethnic or political targeting (MHC, 2025).

As documented by Balkan Insight (2024), political actors actively inflamed online hate speech including ethnic slurs during the campaign period, exacerbating societal polarization and undermining inclusive discourse. The FRANET National Report (European Policy Institute [EPI], 2025) further confirms a surge in ethnic-based hate speech and discriminatory rhetoric in 2024, especially during the pre-election phase. The report highlights persistent challenges in institutional responses, noting how such discourse continues to deepen divisions across North Macedonian society.

This politicized ethnic framing not only undermines interethnic cooperation but also weakens the societal consensus needed for strategic national reforms, particularly those tied to EU integration. As the European Commission's 2024 Rule of Law Report states, "politically divisive and ethnically framed narratives continue to challenge institutional functionality and inclusive policymaking" (European Commission, 2024a).

2.2 Dysfunctional Party Competition and Parliamentary Obstruction

Polarization is also reinforced by a dysfunctional party system. The rivalry between VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM has intensified since the 2015 wiretapping scandal and now routinely manifests as procedural obstruction, legislative boycotts, and rhetorical escalation. According to IDSCS, parliamentary debates during 2023 and 2024 were frequently marked by personal attacks, ethnic accusations, and a near-total absence of policy deliberation (IDSCS, 2024a).

Couteau et al. (2024) notes that while political alternation has occurred, party competition is more often "a performance of antagonism" than a mechanism

of democratic accountability. Moreover, the opposition's refusal to engage in parliamentary dialogue on key EU-related reforms especially constitutional amendments has led to legislative gridlock. (EPI, 2025; European Commission, 2024b). This adversarial environment diminishes prospects for cross-party cooperation, which the EU explicitly considers a cornerstone of democratic functioning and enlargement readiness (European Commission, 2020).

2.3 Media Capture and Partisan Echo Chambers

North Macedonia's media landscape continues to reflect and reinforce political polarization. Although pluralism in media ownership exists on paper, the reality is one of concentrated ownership, political interference, and editorial alignment with party interests (MOM, 2023). According to the 2025 *World Press Freedom Index*, North Macedonia fell to 42nd place globally, a six-place drop from the previous year citing disinformation, editorial pressure, and declining public trust as key concerns (Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

Reports by (AVMU, 2024) and the Macedonian Institute for Media (MIM, 2025) show that television outlets disproportionately favored political parties in pre-election coverage and offered limited analytical content. Meanwhile, Metamorphosis Foundation (Metamorphosis Foundation, 2024b) documented high volumes of online disinformation, including fake news about electoral integrity and hate narratives targeting non majority communities. These patterns have created self-reinforcing media echo chambers, where citizens are exposed primarily to partisan perspectives. Recent analysis by the Institute of Communication Studies (IKS, 2025a) shows that harmful political narratives, including conspiracy theories, demonization, and panic framing, were used in over 24% of political social media posts and 38% of online media reports during the 2024 election period. A related study highlights the use of fear-based and identity-focused narratives by political actors, which reinforce partisan echo chambers and undermine efforts toward inclusive democratic discourse (IKS, 2025b).

Such media fragmentation weakens the public's capacity for informed engagement and reduces the discursive space for inclusive, fact-based dialogue—both of which are essential for depolarization and deliberative engagement (Fishkin, 2018; IREX, 2023).

2.4 Erosion of Institutional Trust and Civic Alienation

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of polarization is the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions. The 2024 *Balkan Barometer* reports that only 27% of citizens in North Macedonia trust their national government, with even lower levels of trust in the judiciary and Parliament (RCC, 2024). Research also notes that the Judicial Council's credibility remains low despite new leadership, reflecting widespread skepticism of institutional neutrality (EPI, 2025).

This civic alienation is compounded by perceptions of elite impunity, low citizen influence over policymaking, and the instrumentalization of EU narratives by political

actors. In this context, deliberative processes have shown promise. EPI's 2023–2024 deliberative polling exercises revealed that when citizens engage in structured, informed, and inclusive discussions, their trust in institutions rises significantly (EPI, 2024a, 2024b).

Fishkin (2018) argues that such deliberative spaces insulated from polarization and performative politics, can restore the civic foundations of democracy by enabling mutual listening, reducing bias, and fostering legitimacy.

3. Impact of Political Polarization on EU Accession

Political polarization in North Macedonia is not simply a domestic governance issue, it is a structural impediment to meeting the political criteria for EU membership. The European Union's enlargement methodology emphasizes not only legal alignment but also democratic functionality, rule of law, and inclusive political dialogue (European Commission, 2020). In North Macedonia, sustained partisan antagonism, institutional delegitimization, and lack of reform consensus have repeatedly stalled progress in key accession chapters, especially in the area of fundamental rights and judiciary (European Commission, 2024b).

3.1 Reform Paralysis and Institutional Blockages

Polarization has led to repeated legislative gridlocks, particularly in Parliament, where boycotts and procedural obstruction have stalled key EU-related reforms. The European Commission's 2024 Rule of Law Report notes that "the political climate remains confrontational, affecting the functioning of institutions, particularly the legislature" (European Commission, 2024b). This is reflected in chronic delays in judicial council appointments, anti-corruption reform stagnation, and the absence of consensus on electoral code changes (EPI, 2025).

The Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC, 2023) also reports that reforms are either rushed without meaningful consultation or indefinitely delayed due to political rivalry. The FRANET Report (EPI, 2025) reinforces this diagnosis, highlighting the lack of enforcement mechanisms to protect against discrimination and hate speech, which exacerbates polarization and undermines rule of law credibility. The result is a perception of formal compliance without democratic depth—a concern echoed by civil society and international monitors.

3.2 Erosion of Oversight and Trust-Building Institutions

Polarization also erodes the effectiveness of independent oversight institutions. Institutions such as the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (SCPC), the Judicial Council, and the Ombudsman's Office are often accused of partisanship or are themselves targets of political attacks. (Couteau et al. (2024), 2024) notes that the instrumentalization of oversight bodies, either through appointments or public delegitimization, contributes to a "trust vacuum," weakening both horizontal accountability and public confidence.

Transparency International's *Corruption Barometer* for April 2024 indicated that public perceptions of corruption remain high, with widespread doubts about the independence of anti-corruption bodies (TI MK, 2024). The 2024 BTI report further highlights that appointments in the civil service and judiciary are frequently perceived as clientelist, further undermining institutional credibility (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

3.3 Declining Public Support for EU Accession

Polarization also weakens the legitimacy of the EU integration agenda. While formal support for EU membership remains relatively strong, public belief in the fairness and credibility of the accession process is eroding. The 2024 *Balkan Barometer* found that only 48% of citizens believe that the EU will admit North Macedonia within the next decade, one of the lowest levels of optimism in the region (RCC, 2024).

This decline is reinforced by the instrumentalization of EU narratives by political actors. As noted by (IDSCS, 2024b), parties often use the EU agenda to accuse opponents of either betrayal or obstruction, turning enlargement into a partisan battleground rather than a shared national goal. Media monitoring by Metamorphosis (Metamorphosis Foundation, 2024a) found that online platforms frequently carry politicized or false narratives about the EU, including claims of "double standards" or "cultural erosion," which further polarize public opinion.

Such trends reflect what Freedom House (Freedom House, 2024) identifies as a broader pattern of "delegitimization of democratic procedures," where institutions and reform processes lose credibility due to constant political manipulation.

3.4 Damage to International Credibility

Finally, polarization damages North Macedonia's credibility with international partners. While external observers often acknowledge the country's formal alignment with EU policies, they increasingly express concern about internal dysfunction. As reported by *Financial Times* and *Balkan Insight*, diplomatic and expert commentary increasingly highlights the gap between normative reform commitments and actual institutional behavior, attributing the discrepancy to elite-driven polarization and governance fragility (Financial Times, 2024; Marusic, 2025).

Couteau et al. (2024) argues that polarization, if left unaddressed, may undermine the EU's own credibility in the region, as it demonstrates that formal compliance can coexist with deep democratic decay. Without progress on political cohesion and institutional functionality, EU support may wane, and accession momentum may be permanently lost.

4. Institutional Response and the Role of Parliament

The Parliament of North Macedonia is constitutionally designated as the central institution for democratic deliberation and accountability. Yet, in practice, it often reflects and amplifies the broader polarization present in the political system. Instead

of serving as a forum for consensus-building on strategic issues such as judicial reform, constitutional amendments, or EU accession alignment, the Parliament frequently operates as a site of institutional conflict, procedural obstruction, and public disillusionment.

4.1 A Forum for Conflict, Not Consensus

The Parliament's internal procedures are regularly disrupted by partisan confrontation. According to the Parliament's 2022 Annual Report, more than one-third of legislative proposals were delayed due to lack of quorum or boycotts (Assembly, 2022). These trends continued into 2023 and 2024, particularly in the context of EU-related reforms. The 2024 European Commission Rule of Law Report highlights that "Parliamentary proceedings remain highly polarized, with limited room for inclusive debate" (European Commission, 2024b). IDSCS's *Parliament Watch* report notes that plenary discussions between July and December 2023 were frequently marred by ethnic slurs, accusations of treason, and obstruction of reform proposals (IDSCS, 2024c). EPI's monitoring brief (EPI, 2025) similarly documents the stalling of critical legislation including amendments to the Judicial Council Law due to opposition resistance and intra-coalition mistrust.

These dynamics weaken Parliament's credibility as a representative body and undermine the EU's benchmark of "effective democratic institutions capable of strategic reform negotiation" (European Commission, 2020).

4.2 Inadequate Inter-Party Dialogue Mechanisms

Efforts to foster structured political dialogue have been intermittent and largely unsuccessful. The Jean Monnet Dialogues, facilitated by the European Parliament, initially brought together parliamentary party representatives for consensus-building sessions. However, follow-up rounds have been postponed or politically disregarded due to a lack of trust and the perception that such platforms are used for tactical advantage rather than genuine deliberation (IDSCS, 2024c; Stratulat & Wunsch, 2021). Attempts to institutionalize inter-party dialogue within parliamentary committees or through cross-party councils have also proven fragile. EPI's Shadow Report (EPI, 2024c) and MCIC (2023) both note that these forums often lack procedural clarity, political commitment, or public legitimacy. As a result, cross-party negotiations are either informal, externally brokered, or entirely absent.

This reflects what Couteau et al. (2024) characterizes as a "consensually deficit," wherein political actors fail to internalize the logic of cooperation even in the face of shared strategic imperatives, such as EU integration.

4.3 Deliberative Democracy as an Institutional Tool

Against this backdrop of institutional dysfunction, deliberative democratic tools offer a promising alternative. According to Fishkin (2018), polarization can be mitigated when citizens and decision-makers engage in structured, inclusive, and informed deliberation outside of performative political arenas. The experience in North

Macedonia supports this claim.

EPI has conducted multiple deliberative polling initiatives, in cooperation with Stanford's Deliberative Democracy Lab and funded by NED. A 2017 national deliberative poll on EU accession showed that support for integration increased from 52.2% to 63.7% after deliberation, alongside greater support for judicial and media reforms (EPI, 2017). In 2023–2024, regional deliberative forums in Polog, Pelagonia, and Skopje revealed that participants, after being exposed to balanced information and opposing viewpoints, reported improved political understanding, greater trust in institutions, and more willingness to compromise (EPI, 2024a, 2024b).

These results suggest that deliberative mechanisms could be formally embedded into parliamentary processes through advisory citizen panels, inclusive committee hearings, or mixed civil society-legislative dialogue formats. Embedding deliberative consultations into reform-sensitive areas can improve the quality of policy design and societal legitimacy.

To date, however, no formal mechanisms exist to integrate such practices into legislative routines. The EU, through its IPA programming and conditionality instruments, could play a catalytic role in mainstreaming deliberative methods as tools for reform facilitation and polarization reduction.

5. Media, Civil Society and Public Discourse

Beyond formal institutions, the tone and structure of public discourse, shaped primarily by the media and civil society, play a decisive role in either reinforcing or mitigating political polarization. In North Macedonia, both sectors face persistent structural challenges but also present untapped opportunities for democratic revitalization through inclusive engagement and deliberation.

5.1 Politicized and Fragmented Media Landscape

North Macedonia's media landscape remains among the most polarized in Southeast Europe. The 2025 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2025) ranks the country 42nd globally, highlighting deteriorating editorial independence due to political pressure and media ownership concentration. The Media Ownership Monitor (MOM, 2023) reports that four owners' control over 80% of national broadcasting, enabling partisanship and undermining pluralism.

AVMU's 2024 reports confirm systematic bias in national broadcasters' pre-election coverage, while the Macedonian Institute for Media (MIM, 2025) highlights low journalistic standards, self-censorship, and limited analytical depth. Disinformation further inflamed political tensions during the 2024 elections, particularly online (Metamorphosis Foundation, 2024a).

The FRANET Report (EPI, 2025) adds that institutional failure to regulate digital hate narratives has contributed to a toxic discourse environment. IREX's 2023 Vibrant Information Barometer similarly categorizes the information ecosystem as "vulnerable," due to misinformation and weak fact-checking mechanisms. Such

conditions erode the deliberative potential of media and entrench echo chambers that reinforce political tribalism (Fishkin, 2018).

5.2 Civil Society's Role in Countering Polarization

Despite operating in a constrained environment, civil society in North Macedonia continues to advocate for inclusive dialogue and democratic reform. MCIC's 2024 survey shows that CSOs retain relatively strong trust among youth (51.8%) and ethnic Albanians (45.6%), though skepticism persists among older and urban populations (MCIC, 2024).

The Macedonian Helsinki Committee (MHC) documented over 1,100 hate speech incidents in 2023 and 69 more in January 2025 alone (MHC, 2025). Their 2024 legal analysis describes the regulatory framework as outdated, fragmented, and poorly enforced (MHC, 2024). The "Harm-tive Monthly Report" by ResPublica (2024) adds that hate speech sharply intensified during the 2024 elections, particularly targeting political opponents and minority communities.

Although CSOs face exclusion from decision-making, as noted by BCSDN (2025), many have innovated through deliberative engagement and public education. These efforts while often unsupported by state institutions form a critical safeguard against polarization and contribute to a more participatory democratic culture.

5.3 Deliberative Democracy in Civil Society Practice

The European Policy Institute (EPI) has led the implementation of deliberative polling in North Macedonia, demonstrating that structured citizen engagement can reduce polarization and improve civic trust. The 2023–2024 series of deliberative events—conducted across Skopje, Polog, and Pelagonia brought together diverse citizens to deliberate on North Macedonia's geopolitical orientation. Participants were provided with balanced materials and facilitated discussion, leading to increased openness to opposing views and improved policy understanding (EPI, 2024a, 2024b).

This aligns with Fishkin's theory that non-confrontational, informed deliberation can depolarize attitudes and restore democratic legitimacy (Fishkin, 2018). EPI's findings show that participants reported greater trust in institutions and stronger identification with national priorities following deliberation, suggesting that such processes could serve as a complement to representative democracy.

These participatory approaches have gained attention among donors such as the EU Delegation, NED, and EED, but have yet to be institutionalized. The *Institute for Media and Analytics* (IMA), with support from the European Endowment for Democracy, has also piloted educational content and youth outreach models that foster critical thinking and reduce media-driven polarization (EED, 2024).

5.4 Barriers to Scaling Deliberative Engagement

Despite promising results, deliberative initiatives in North Macedonia face systemic constraints. These include inconsistent donor funding, insufficient media coverage, and political resistance. Political elites often resist inclusive deliberative platforms out

of fear of losing narrative control or disrupting patronage-based consensus-building. (Stratulat & Wunsch, 2021)

Nevertheless, deliberative practices remain among the few empirically supported tools for rebuilding societal trust in a polarized environment. Their institutionalization through parliamentary hearings, municipal planning forums, or national consultation processes could significantly strengthen democratic resilience and public engagement with the EU accession process.

6. The EU's role and conditionality in addressing Polarization

The EU has long promoted democratic consolidation and the rule of law as foundational pillars of its enlargement strategy. However, in the case of North Macedonia, political polarization remains a persistent structural barrier to effective reform, while EU conditionality has struggled to address it in a direct or institutionalized manner. This section examines how polarization is framed by the EU, where conditionality gaps exist, and how deliberative democratic tools could be mainstreamed to strengthen the credibility and impact of the accession process.

6.1 EU Framing of Polarization: Recognition Without Targeted Response

The European Commission's 2024 Rule of Law Report and 2023 Country Report for North Macedonia both explicitly acknowledge that political polarization continues to undermine institutional effectiveness and legislative progress (European Commission, 2023, 2024a). Yet, this recognition has not been matched by a tailored policy response. Polarization is consistently treated as a contextual challenge listed under broader categories such as the "functioning of democratic institutions" or "political dialogue" rather than as a structural problem requiring targeted benchmarks.

(Couteau et al. (2024), (2024)) underscores that the EU's current approach to polarization in candidate countries remains indirect, relying on soft political messaging and generalized governance conditions rather than deploying tools that incentivize or enforce consensus-building practices. As a result, deeply polarized political environments such as in North Macedonia persist beneath a surface of formal institutional compliance.

6.2 Gaps in Conditionality: The Transactional Trap

A substantial body of literature argues that EU conditionality suffers from a "transactional trap," in which formal compliance is rewarded at the expense of deep democratic reform (Stratulat & Wunsch, 2021). This model allows political elites to perform alignment through legislative outputs without addressing institutional trust or democratic norms.

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BIEPAG, 2021) and Clingendael Institute (2022) describe this dynamic as enabling "stabilitocracies", regimes that maintain the façade of progress while consolidating informal power. In North Macedonia, EU narratives have often been instrumentalized to attack political rivals, delegitimize institutions, and portray reforms as external impositions (Freedom

House, 2024; IDSCS, 2024c; EPI, 2024a, 2024b).

FRANET's 2025 findings support this critique, documenting failures in protecting fundamental rights, hate speech regulation, and institutional independence (EPI, 2025). Jordanova (2021) argues that benchmarking in Chapters 23 and 24 is overly technocratic, neglecting rule of law resilience and democratic culture. The politicization of bilateral issues, especially with Bulgaria, has further undermined the EU's credibility—turning enlargement into a geopolitical bargaining process (Kacarska, 2022; ECFR, 2022).

Abazi Imeri (2022a, 2022b) adds that the EU's leniency toward stabilitocracy reinforces elite dominance and deepens polarization. Her analysis, grounded in deliberative polling and civic engagement studies, shows that North Macedonian citizens support democratic practices but lack institutional channels to translate preferences into policy. Unless EU conditionality evolves to prioritize internal democratization over performative alignment, it risks perpetuating elite entrenchment rather than mitigating democratic stagnation.

6.3 Missed Opportunities: Deliberative democracy and inclusive dialogue

Despite the clear potential of structured public engagement to counter polarization, the EU has not integrated deliberative democracy into its enlargement methodology or IPA programming. This is a missed opportunity. The work of EPI in North Macedonia supported by Stanford's Deliberative Democracy Lab and the National Endowment for Democracy demonstrates that deliberative polling can meaningfully increase institutional trust, improve political understanding, and foster citizen willingness to compromise on divisive issues (EPI, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

Fishkin (2018) argues that polarization can be reduced when citizens are exposed to balanced information and reasoned discussion, free from partisan distortion. EPI's deliberative events in 2023–2024 support this thesis, showing that post-deliberation, participants reported greater readiness to support complex reforms including those related to foreign policy, judicial independence, and constitutional amendments.

However, these exercises remain externally funded and disconnected from formal EU-supported reform mechanisms. As the BCSDN (2025) notes, civil society engagement continues to be treated as an auxiliary component of reform, rather than a core mechanism of democratic legitimacy.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

North Macedonia's EU accession process is at a critical juncture. Despite years of legal harmonization and diplomatic breakthroughs, the country's path toward membership remains obstructed by a deeply entrenched political polarization that undermines democratic consolidation, institutional legitimacy, and reform credibility. This paper has argued that polarization is not a secondary concern but a structural barrier to EU accession, a barrier insufficiently addressed by current conditionality frameworks. Empirical evidence drawn from the 2024 European Commission Country Report and

Rule of Law Report, Freedom House, Western Balkans and enlargement experts as well as domestic monitoring by local CSOs shows how polarization paralyzes legislative processes, erodes trust in oversight institutions, and diminishes public support for EU integration. Institutional responses, particularly those of Parliament have proven insufficient to counteract polarization, and cross-party dialogue mechanisms remain either non-operational or politically manipulated.

Yet, amid these challenges, deliberative democracy offers a path forward. As demonstrated by the European Policy Institute's deliberative polling exercises, structured citizen engagement can enhance political understanding, reduce bias, and foster a readiness to compromise. These findings support the theoretical framework advanced by James Fishkin and the Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab, that polarization thrives in environments of mutual exclusion, misinformation, and performative partisanship and can be reversed through informed, inclusive public deliberation.

To align its enlargement tools with these insights, the EU should update its conditionality framework to prioritize political depolarization and civic inclusion as core democratic standards. This involves embedding deliberative practices in IPA programming, institutionalizing civic engagement within parliamentary processes, and developing benchmarks that measure the quality of political dialogue alongside legal compliance.

A credible EU accession process cannot be sustained in a political environment where polarization distorts institutional behavior, delegitimizes reforms, and erodes societal trust. As authoritarian tendencies rise across Europe and its neighborhood, North Macedonia must not only meet the formal criteria for membership but must also lead by example in democratic innovation.

The road to Brussels runs not only through legal approximation and geopolitical alignment—but through Skopje's Parliament, civil society platforms, and a revitalized public sphere where citizens are heard, not just counted.

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