EU Conditionality and Regional Relations Restructuring: Evidence from Albania's Reform Trajectory (2014–2025)

Anisa Hysesani[1]

Rashmi Gujrati[2]

Kürşat Çapraz[3]

Viviane Filippi[4]

[1]*Academy of Security and "Aleksandër Moisiu" University of Durrës, Department of Public Administration, Durrës, Albania*
[2]*Ludhiana Group of Colleges, Chaukimann, Ferozepur Road, Ludhiana, Punjab 142023, India*
[3]*Sakarya University, Esentepe Kampüsü, Esentepe, Üniversite Cd., 54050 Serdivan/Sakarya, Türkiye*
[4]*Luiss Guido Carli University, Viale Romania, 32, 00197 Roma RM, Italy*

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Abstract

This article addresses two gaps in the EU conditionality literature: the absence of systematic accounts of how domestic conditionality-driven reforms reshape candidate states' bilateral and regional relations, and the absence of theoretical tools for capturing the interaction among multiple overlapping conditionality frameworks. Using Albania's 2014–2025 trajectory as a revelatory case, the study combines systematic thematic analysis of a documentary corpus (twelve European Commission Country Reports, Council Conclusions, Berlin Process communiqués, the Growth Plan Reform Agenda, and bilateral instruments) with structured causal-process observations in the Brady and Collier (2010) tradition. Four hypotheses are tested. The findings are that judicial vetting and the Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) operated as credibility-building mechanisms with measurable regional spillover (H1); that conditionality produced asymmetric bilateral effects, reinforcing some cooperative dynamics while generating friction in others (H2); that the simultaneous operation of accession conditionality, Berlin Process commitments and the Growth Plan produced strategic compliance prioritization rather than uniform reform (H3); and that geopolitical alignment after 2022 functioned as a supplementary credibility resource (H4). The article contributes an embedded multiple conditionality framework that extends the External Incentives Model by integrating insights from the policy-layering literature, and offers the first systematic peer-reviewed study of Albania's post-2022 accession trajectory.

Keywords: ***EU conditionality; Western Balkans; Albania; Europeanization; policy layering; justice reform***

1. Introduction

For more than two decades the European Union has framed enlargement as the most powerful instrument of foreign policy at its disposal, capable of pulling candidate states toward democratic transformation through the conditional promise of membership (Grabbe, 2006; Vachudova, 2005). Whether that instrument has delivered substantive institutional change in the Western Balkans, however, remains a contested empirical question. Accession has been extended to the region for more than twenty years without producing a single new member state since Croatia (Anastasakis, 2008; Džankić et al., 2019). Between 2014 and 2025 four developments together justify a fresh empirical assessment: Albania received candidate status in June 2014, a revised enlargement methodology took effect in 2020, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 jolted enlargement back onto the political agenda (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Karjalainen, 2023), and from 15 October 2024 onward Albania opened all six negotiating clusters in just over thirteen months (European Commission, 2025; European Parliament, 2025).

Scholarly work on EU conditionality has produced sophisticated frameworks for interpreting how the Union diffuses its rules and norms to candidate states. The External Incentives Model of Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004, 2020) identifies the credibility of the membership promise, the determinacy of conditions, and the size of domestic adoption costs as the variables that shape compliance. Complementary frameworks have enriched the picture: Börzel and Risse (2003) on goodness-of-fit, Noutcheva (2009) on the distinction between genuine, partial, fake and imposed compliance, and Sedelmeier (2008, 2014) on the limits of conditionality after accession. Recent scholarship has documented a troubling decoupling between formal harmonization and substantive democratic quality. Richter and Wunsch (2020) describe a pattern of "reform without transformation", while Bieber (2020) diagnoses an underlying rise of authoritarianism inside the very container of EU integration.

Three gaps in this literature define the space the present study occupies. The first is the absence of any systematic examination of how EU-conditioned domestic reforms affect a candidate state's bilateral and regional relations. Research on conditionality and research on regional cooperation have developed as separate streams (Bechev, 2017; Töglhofer & Adebahr, 2017); no scholar has traced the causal chain from internal institutional transformation to external diplomatic repositioning. The second gap concerns the interaction of multiple conditionality frameworks. Since October 2024 Albania has navigated accession conditionality organized through six thematic clusters, Berlin Process commitments including the Common Regional Market Action Plan, the Growth Plan Reform Agenda tied to 922.1 million euros (State Agency for Strategic Programming and Aid Coordination [SASPAC], 2024), and CEFTA-based trade obligations. The External Incentives Model treats conditionality as a unitary variable. The empirical reality of the post-2024 Western Balkans involves layered mechanisms with distinct institutional logics that the original theoretical architecture cannot capture, and that the policy-layering literature in historical institutionalism (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005) suggests should be analysed as gradual institutional change.

The third gap is temporal and country-specific. Albania's experience since the opening of negotiations in July 2022, and especially the cluster openings of 2024 and 2025, has not yet been subjected to systematic peer-reviewed analysis. Academic publishing lags policy developments by two to three years, which leaves the most dynamic phase of Albania's EU integration journey without scholarly scrutiny. Elbasani's (2013) foundational work on Albania and the EU predates the 2020 methodology, the post-2022 geopolitical shift, and the negotiation momentum of 2024–2025.

The study addresses these gaps through one research question: through what causal mechanisms have EU-conditioned reforms in Albania, particularly justice reform, rule of law conditionality, and foreign policy alignment, reshaped Albania's bilateral relations with Kosovo, Serbia and North Macedonia, and its engagement in regional cooperation frameworks? Four hypotheses, derived from the theoretical framework and stated explicitly in Section 2.5, are tested through a qualitative single-case design that combines systematic thematic document analysis with structured causal-process observations. The article proposes an embedded multiple conditionality framework that extends the External Incentives Model by integrating insights from the policy-layering literature.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature, derives four hypotheses, and positions the study against the existing scholarship. Section 3 describes the research design and analytical strategy. Section 4 presents the findings organized around the four hypotheses, with explicit attention to rival explanations. Section 5 discusses the findings and articulates the theoretical and practical contributions. Section 6 closes with implications and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 External incentives, Europeanization, and policy layering

The study draws on three complementary bodies of theory and proposes a synthesis that bridges them. The first is the External Incentives Model articulated by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004, 2005, 2020), which explains EU rule transfer through a rationalist logic of conditional rewards. The EU sets conditions for membership, and candidate states adopt the required rules when the benefits of the EU reward exceed the domestic costs of compliance. Three variables mediate this calculation: the credibility of the conditional promise, the determinacy of the conditions, and the relative size of adoption costs facing domestic veto players. The 2020 revision confirmed the model's explanatory power across Central and Eastern Europe and partially in the Western Balkans, while acknowledging that it operates with highly abstract conditions that require contextual specification to explain cross-country and cross-issue variation (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020).

The second body of theory is Europeanization, particularly the adaptational pressure mechanism set out by Börzel and Risse (2003). EU influence on domestic structures operates through two channels: rational redistribution, where EU pressures alter the opportunity structure for domestic actors by empowering certain groups and constraining others, and socialization, where actors internalize European norms through persuasion, social learning and identity formation. Radaelli's (2003) broader conceptualization of Europeanization as the construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules provides the macro-level lens. For the Western Balkans, Elbasani (2013) and Anastasakis (2008) have shown that Europeanization operates under fundamentally different conditions than in Central Europe given the region's distinct historical legacies, weaker institutional capacity, more contested statehood, and the absence of the geopolitical urgency that characterized post-Cold War enlargement. A critical addition is Noutcheva's (2009) typology, which distinguishes between genuine, partial, fake and imposed compliance, and enables a nuanced reading of mixed reform patterns.

The third body of theory comes from historical institutionalism, specifically the literature on gradual institutional change developed by Streeck and Thelen (2005) and extended by Mahoney and Thelen (2010). Streeck and Thelen identify four modes of gradual change, of which layering is the most relevant here: the addition of new rules or institutions alongside existing ones rather than the displacement of the latter. Layering generates outcomes that neither set of rules would produce in isolation, because the new rules interact with the old in ways that often escape the intent of either designer. Béland (2007) developed the concept further by linking layering to ideas and policy drift in social security, while van der Heijden (2011) consolidated the concept across the regulatory governance literature. The relevance for EU conditionality is direct but unexploited: the Western Balkans accession framework as it stands in 2025 consists of multiple layered conditionality instruments added at different historical moments without explicit harmonization of their reward structures, monitoring mechanisms or compliance timelines.

Building on these three foundations, the study proposes the concept of embedded multiple conditionality. The framework extends the External Incentives Model by integrating the insight from policy-layering scholarship that overlapping rule sets generate interaction effects beyond what unitary models can capture, and by drawing on Sedelmeier's (2008, 2014) work on strategic selective compliance to specify the behavioural implications. Four features distinguish embedded multiple conditionality. Conditionality multiplicity refers to the simultaneous operation of several distinct conditionality mechanisms targeting the same country. Reward differentiation captures the variation in reward types, time horizons and credibility levels across frameworks. Strategic selectivity describes the rational tendency of actors to prioritize compliance with frameworks offering the most immediate and tangible returns, building on Falkner and Treib's (2008) account of three or four worlds of compliance. Coherence risk identifies the danger that framework multiplication fragments rather than reinforces reform efforts. The framework is intended as a parsimonious extension of the External Incentives Model for contexts in which multiple conditionalities operate simultaneously; it does not replace the model but specifies its scope conditions under conditionality layering.

Three points of differentiation clarify what is new about the concept, how it departs from existing theories of EU conditionality, and why the extension is needed. First, existing conditionality theories model the demand side of conditionality as unitary: the External Incentives Model assumes a single principal offering a single reward, membership, on a single timeline, and its explanatory variables of credibility, determinacy and adoption costs are calibrated to that assumption (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, 2020). Embedded multiple conditionality instead theorizes a demand side composed of several reward-differentiated frameworks whose incentive structures must be analysed jointly rather than one at a time. Second, the closest existing concepts address the response side of compliance rather than the

structure of the demands themselves: Noutcheva's (2009) typology classifies varieties of compliance, Falkner and Treib's (2008) worlds of compliance classify national implementation styles, and Sedelmeier's (2008, 2014) selective compliance concerns the post-accession weakening of a single conditionality instrument. None of these accounts explains why a candidate state facing several simultaneous frameworks complies rapidly with one and slowly with another at the same political moment, which is precisely the behavioural pattern the new concept predicts. Third, the qualifier embedded distinguishes the concept from a generic multiple-principals account: the frameworks in question are not free-standing regimes but instruments nested within the single overarching membership perspective, so that their rewards are partly convertible, their monitoring processes cross-reference one another, and performance under one framework feeds the credibility assessments made under the others. A new concept is therefore required not because existing theory is wrong but because the post-2024 empirical configuration, in which at least four such instruments operate simultaneously on one candidate, lies outside the scope conditions of unitary models; without the extension, systematically differential compliance across frameworks appears anomalous rather than theoretically expected.

2.2 Effectiveness, strategic selective compliance, and stabilitocracy

Scholarly debate over the effectiveness of EU conditionality in the Western Balkans ranges along a spectrum from qualified optimism to fundamental skepticism. The optimistic position, associated with Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's (2020) revised analysis, maintains that conditionality has produced measurable institutional reforms where its core conditions are met. From this perspective the principal obstacle to effectiveness has been the erosion of membership credibility caused by prolonged accession timelines, member state vetoes and enlargement fatigue, rather than any fundamental flaw in the mechanism itself. The historical context was set by Grabbe's (2006) foundational study of the EU's transformative power and Vachudova's (2005) examination of how membership incentives interacted with democratization during the 1990s and early 2000s.

The skeptical position has gained considerable traction. Richter and Wunsch (2020) identify a striking decoupling between formal compliance and democratic quality, and coin the phrase "reform without transformation" to describe rising legislative harmonization alongside declining governance outcomes. Their analysis traces this decoupling to three mechanisms through which EU conditionality inadvertently consolidates state capture: market liberalization without adequate safeguards concentrates economic resources among connected elites, reform mandates weaken domestic accountability by concentrating authority in executive hands, and EU engagement lends international legitimacy to ruling governments regardless of governance quality. Vukov (2025) elaborates the structural dimension of this argument, showing how earlier Eastern enlargements set the institutional template for the contemporary capture dynamics now observed in the Western Balkans.

The literature on strategic selective compliance, originally developed for the post-accession context, has direct relevance for understanding behaviour under multiple conditionalities. Sedelmeier (2008) demonstrated that compliance after accession remains conditional on domestic political incentives rather than on the automatic internalization of EU norms. His later analysis (Sedelmeier, 2014) showed that the EU's capacity to anchor democracy from above is constrained when domestic incumbents calculate that the costs of compliance exceed the available external sanctions. Falkner and Treib (2008) classified member states into three or four worlds of compliance based on differing transposition and enforcement patterns, with selective and non-compliance as systematic responses rather than aberrations. The embedded multiple conditionality framework proposed here applies analogous logic to pre-accession candidate states, predicting that the multiplication of conditionality frameworks intensifies selective compliance because each framework offers distinct rewards on distinct timelines.

The concept of stabilitocracy, introduced by Kmezić and Bieber (2017) and elaborated in Bieber's (2020) comprehensive account of authoritarianism's rise in the region, captures a specific pathology that is central to understanding the context in which Albania's reforms operate. Stabilitocracy describes a situation in which the EU prioritizes political stability and cooperative rhetoric over democratic governance substance, creating perverse incentives for incumbent leaders to maintain the appearance of reform compliance while resisting genuine institutional change. Džankić et al.'s (2019) edited volume concludes that whether Europeanisation in the Western Balkans constitutes a failure of EU conditionality depends critically on which dimension is evaluated and which country is examined.

2.3 The post-2022 geopolitical turn and new conditionality instruments

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 functioned as a geopolitical shock that altered the EU's enlargement calculus. Karjalainen (2023) characterizes the period from 2013 to 2022 as one lacking both effectiveness and active enlargement drive, with the war providing the geopolitical impetus for a policy restart. The granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, followed by the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in the same month, signaled a shift toward geopolitically motivated enlargement, or more precisely a rebalancing of the tension between normative assessment and strategic calculation (Anghel & Džankić, 2023; Hunter et al., 2025; Schimmelfennig, 2023).

The 2020 enlargement methodology, introduced before the geopolitical turn but operationalized after it, reorganized negotiations into six thematic clusters with the Fundamentals cluster (covering rule of law, judiciary, fundamental rights and democratic institutions) opening first and closing last. It also introduced the principle of reversibility, that is, the ability to reopen chapters or scale back accession benefits in response to backsliding. Leuffen et al. (2025) conclude that the methodology was necessary but insufficient for altering fundamental negotiation dynamics. The reversibility principle has never been applied in practice, which raises legitimate questions about its deterrent effect.

The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, set out by the Commission in November 2023 and operationalized through Regulation 2024/1449 (European Commission, 2023; European Union, 2024), added a qualitatively new conditionality layer. With a six-billion-euro envelope distributed through Reform and Growth Facilities tied to country-specific Reform Agendas, the Growth Plan operates alongside but distinct from traditional accession conditionality. The European Commission endorsed Albania's Reform Agenda in October 2024, allocating 922.1 million euros through 2027 across three channels: 429 million euros in direct budget support, 265 million euros in WBIF investment grants, and 228 million euros in WBIF concessional loans (SASPAC, 2024). Albania received its first pre-financing tranche of 64.5 million euros in March 2025. This parallel conditionality track, offering direct financial rewards on shorter timelines than accession, exemplifies the layered conditionality environment to which the embedded multiple conditionality framework responds (Buscaneanu & Li, 2024; Karagiannis & Kakarnias, 2026; Mesarovich & Schumacher, 2025).

2.4 Regional cooperation and bilateral dynamics

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans operates through multiple overlapping frameworks, each carrying distinct conditionality logics and varying degrees of inclusiveness. The Berlin Process, launched in 2014 by Germany as an informal complement to the formal enlargement process during a period of acute enlargement fatigue, has served as the primary mechanism for sustaining EU engagement with the region outside formal accession negotiations (Töglhofer & Adebahr, 2017). The Process has delivered concrete outcomes: the Common Regional Market Action Plan, agreements on mutual recognition of professional qualifications, the elimination of roaming charges between the EU and Western Balkans, and a College of Europe campus in Tirana. Albania hosted the landmark Tirana Summit on 16 October 2023, the first Berlin Process summit held in a Western Balkan country (Bundesregierung, 2023). The 2024 anniversary summit produced the CRM 2.0 Action Plan (2025–2028), extending the Common Regional Market's scope beyond the four freedoms into competitiveness, green and digital transition, and economic convergence. Griessler (2020) credits the Berlin Process with sustaining political momentum during enlargement fatigue but notes its predominantly declarative character in areas requiring deeper institutional cooperation.

The Open Balkan initiative, launched in 2019 as a trilateral effort among Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia, represents a fundamentally different approach to regional integration, one driven by participant states rather than external conditionality. Despite agreements on labor mobility, electronic identification and food safety, the initiative encountered obstacles that limited its scope and impact. Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti rejected it as instrumentalizing Serbian regional ambitions; Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina declined participation; and the EU explicitly preferred the more inclusive CRM framework. By 2025, Open Balkan had largely been absorbed into the broader CRM architecture (Kulo & Novikau, 2024).

Bilateral dynamics introduce analytical complexity that existing frameworks do not adequately capture. The Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, anchored in the 2023 Ohrid Agreement, has remained largely paralyzed, with neither party implementing key obligations: Serbia has not recognized Kosovo's independence, and Kosovo has not established the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. The wider geopolitical environment in which these disputes play out has been described by Bechev (2017) as one of rival external influence, with Russian and Chinese engagement complicating the EU's normative influence. Bulgaria's blockage of North Macedonia's accession process from 2020 to 2022 delayed

Albania's own negotiations by two years, since both countries were procedurally linked until their formal decoupling on 15 October 2024 (European Western Balkans, 2024). Albania-Kosovo relations, despite deep ethnic, cultural and historical ties, experienced visible strain after 2023 over disagreements concerning Open Balkan, the approach to Serbia, and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, particularly following the tensions over the north of Kosovo and the May 2023 mayoral elections crisis. These bilateral fault lines intersect with EU conditionality dynamics in ways the existing literature has not examined.

2.5 Research gaps, hypotheses, and study positioning

Three interconnected gaps emerge from this review and define the space the study occupies. First, the causal chain from EU-conditioned domestic reforms to changes in bilateral and regional relations has never been empirically traced. Second, the theoretical architecture for understanding multiple overlapping conditionality frameworks is absent from the existing literature, despite the availability of policy-layering tools (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005) that could inform such an architecture. Third, Albania as a standalone case study of EU conditionality in the post-2022 period is virtually nonexistent in the peer-reviewed literature, despite the country's status as the region's fastest-advancing candidate. The study positions itself as a response to all three gaps.

Four hypotheses, derived from the theoretical framework, structure the empirical analysis:

H1 (judicial spillover): EU-conditioned judicial reforms function as credibility-building mechanisms that produce positive regional spillover, expanding the candidate state's diplomatic role and normative standing in regional cooperation frameworks.

H2 (asymmetric bilateral effects): EU conditionality produces asymmetric rather than uniform effects on bilateral relations, with differentiated outcomes depending on the partner state's own conditionality engagement and the specific reform agenda at issue.

H3 (strategic compliance prioritization): When multiple conditionality frameworks operate simultaneously, candidate states prioritize compliance according to reward immediacy, tangibility and monitoring intensity rather than uniform reform commitment across all frameworks.

H4 (geopolitical credibility premium): In the post-2022 period, geopolitical alignment functions as a supplementary credibility resource alongside normative reform performance, altering the relative weighting of EU accession assessment.

Albania's 2014–2025 trajectory provides a revelatory case for testing these four hypotheses because it combines the region's most radical justice reform, rapid post-2022 cluster advancement, simultaneous operation of all four conditionality frameworks, and full geopolitical alignment with EU foreign policy. The case selection permits within-unit depth combined with cross-relationship comparison across the three bilateral relationships and the regional cooperation engagement.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

The study employs a qualitative embedded single-case design (Yin, 2018, Type 2) that combines systematic thematic document analysis with structured causal-process observations in the Brady and Collier (2010) tradition. The main case is Albania's EU-conditioned reform process during the period 2014–2025, with five embedded sub-units of analysis: (a) justice reform and rule of law as the primary domestic reform dimension; (b) Albania-Kosovo bilateral relations; (c) Albania-Serbia bilateral relations; (d) Albania-North Macedonia bilateral relations; and (e) Albania's engagement in regional cooperation frameworks, including the Berlin Process, Common Regional Market and Open Balkan.

The embedded design serves three analytical purposes. It permits within-unit depth while allowing systematic comparison of how the same domestic reform dynamics produce differentiated effects across bilateral relationships. It maintains the holistic character of the single case while avoiding the risk of studying regional relations in isolation from domestic transformation. And it aligns with the study's focus on causal mechanisms rather than causal effects.

Albania's selection as a single case is justified on three grounds. It constitutes a typical case of Western Balkan Europeanization insofar as it is a candidate country undergoing accession conditionality. It is simultaneously a distinctive case within the region due to its non-Yugoslav historical legacy, unique post-communist isolation, and special relationship with Kosovo. And it functions as a longitudinal case capturing evolution across three distinct phases that correspond to

qualitatively different conditionality configurations: the pre-negotiation period (2014–2022), the post-opening period (2022–2024), and the rapid advancement period (2024–2025).

3.2 Documentary corpus

The documentary corpus is organized into five categories. The first comprises European Commission Country Reports on Albania from 2014 through 2025, totaling twelve annual assessments that provide the most consistent and detailed external evaluation of Albania's reform trajectory. The second includes Council of the EU Conclusions on enlargement and related policy statements, approximately twenty documents that capture the political dynamics shaping the enlargement framework. The third encompasses Berlin Process summit communiqués from 2014 through 2024, ten documents that record the evolution of regional cooperation commitments. The fourth contains bilateral agreements and joint declarations between Albania and Kosovo, Serbia and North Macedonia, sourced from official government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives. The fifth comprises secondary analytical sources, including policy reports from the European Policy Centre, Clingendael Institute, the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.

Longitudinal governance data were collected from four established databases for triangulation purposes: V-Dem democracy indices, World Governance Indicators, Freedom House Nations in Transit scores, and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. The quantitative indicators serve a triangulation rather than a hypothesis-testing role. They enable the identification of critical junctures and trend shifts that warrant qualitative investigation, and provide independent verification of patterns observed in the documentary analysis.

3.3 Analytical strategy and coding procedure

The analysis proceeded in two sequential and mutually informing phases. In the first phase, systematic thematic document analysis was applied to the entire corpus using a hybrid deductive-inductive coding strategy. The codebook contained eleven deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework: credibility of the membership promise, determinacy of conditions, adoption costs, formal compliance, substantive transformation, genuine compliance, partial compliance, fake compliance, normative spillover, strategic compliance prioritization, and conditionality layering. Five inductive codes emerged during analysis and were progressively refined: geopolitical alignment, regional cooperation friction, financial conditionality, reform reversal, and cross-framework tension. Coding was conducted manually using a structured analytical spreadsheet organized by document, year, and embedded sub-unit. To assess coding stability in the absence of a second coder, 20 percent of the corpus was re-coded by the author after a four-week interval; intra-coder agreement between rounds exceeded 90 percent for the deductive codes and 82 percent for the inductive codes, with discrepancies resolved by returning to the source text. Intra-coder stability is acknowledged as a weaker check than inter-coder reliability would provide, and is reported here as a transparency measure rather than as a substitute.

In the second phase, structured causal-process observations in the Brady and Collier (2010) tradition, operationalized through Collier's (2011) typology of evidentiary tests, were applied to four critical episodes that constitute the pivotal moments of Albania's conditionality experience: (a) the granting of candidate status and the initial reform momentum in 2014, including the launch of the five key priorities; (b) the delayed-negotiations period, encompassing the French, Dutch and Danish vetoes of 2018–2019 and Bulgaria's blockage of 2020–2022; (c) the opening of accession negotiations and the geopolitical turn of 2022; and (d) the rapid cluster openings and Growth Plan implementation of 2024–2025. For each episode the analysis identified observable implications of the four hypotheses, located documentary evidence corresponding to each implication, and assessed whether the evidence discriminated between the hypothesized mechanism and three rival explanations: domestic political cycles independent of EU conditionality, external geopolitical pressures from Russia or China, and bilateral historical dynamics with independent causal force. The structured causal-process observations approach, as articulated by Collier (2011), is more parsimonious than the formal Bayesian test typology developed by Beach and Pedersen (2019) and is appropriate for single-case explaining-outcome analysis where the goal is to construct a plausible causal narrative rather than to apply formal Bayesian updating to discrete tests.

3.4 Methodological boundaries

Three methodological boundaries must be acknowledged. First, reliance on documentary analysis without primary interview data means that the study captures official and publicly documented dynamics rather than the informal political calculations, personal relationships and undocumented diplomatic exchanges that may drive decision-making behind closed doors. The boundary is mitigated through triangulation across multiple documentary sources with different institutional perspectives, cross-referencing of official accounts with independent assessments from think tanks and investigative journalism outlets, and supplementation with quantitative governance indicators produced through independent methodologies. The boundary nevertheless constrains the depth at which causal mechanisms operating through informal channels can be traced.

Second, the single-case design constrains statistical generalizability. The study's contribution is analytical generalization, namely the refinement and extension of theoretical propositions to similar cases, rather than population-level inference. The scope conditions of the embedded multiple conditionality framework are candidate states subject to at least three simultaneous conditionality instruments with differentiated reward structures and time horizons; whether the framework applies beyond the Western Balkans (for instance to Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia under their evolving conditionality configurations) is an empirical question for subsequent comparative work.

Third, structured causal-process observations differ from formal Bayesian process tracing in their evidentiary requirements. Where Beach and Pedersen's (2019) approach requires explicit specification of prior probabilities and updating rules, the approach used here treats documentary evidence as a coherent narrative whose internal consistency and external corroboration are the principal evaluative criteria. Readers seeking formal Bayesian updating will not find it here; readers seeking a documented and plausible causal narrative supported by triangulated documentary evidence will.

4. Results

4.1 Justice reform with regional spillover (H1)

The documentary record provides strong support for H1, the proposition that EU-conditioned judicial reforms function as credibility-building mechanisms with positive regional spillover. Albania's comprehensive justice reform, launched in 2016 through constitutional amendments adopted with the rare consensus of all parliamentary parties, operated as the country's most powerful credibility-building mechanism in both domestic and regional dimensions. The vetting process (in Albanian, Vetingu), overseen by an International Monitoring Operation with European Commission participation, evaluated 805 magistrates at first instance through the Independent Qualification Commission (Komisioni i Pavarur i Kualifikimit, KPK). According to the official Albania Delegation bulletin of the European External Action Service (EEAS, 2025), by 15 September 2025 the Commission had issued 367 confirmations, 268 dismissals, 162 terminations of office (113 of which due to resignation and 49 for other reasons), and 8 suspensions. Combined dismissals and resignations therefore account for 381 of the 805 first-instance decisions, or 47.3 percent of the cohort.

Two clarifications are warranted on this calculation. The 113 resignations are categorized by the EEAS as terminations of office, meaning that the magistrates concerned resigned during the vetting process and their resignations were subsequently recorded as KPK first-instance dispositions. The 47.3 percent figure should therefore be read as combining both formal dismissals and preemptive resignations within the formal vetting cohort, not as conflating two unrelated categories. Even read narrowly as dismissals alone (268 of 805, or 33.3 percent), the scale of institutional disruption is without parallel in the Western Balkans or in any EU candidate country's experience.

European Commission Country Reports document a progressive upgrading of assessment language for Albania's justice reform, from "initial steps" in 2016 through "moderate progress" by 2019 to "good progress" and "positive consolidation of results" by 2023–2025. The operational launch of the Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (Struktura e Posçme Këndër Korrupsionit dhe Krimit të Organizuar, SPAK) on 19 December 2019, established under Law 95/2016, has been consistently cited in EU documents as evidence of Albania's institutional transformation. Two SPAK actions stand out: the custody of former President Ilir Meta on 21 October 2024 (Tirana Times, 2024) and the ongoing proceedings against former Prime Minister Sali Berisha. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index recorded Albania's score rising to 42 out of 100 in 2024, up from 37 the previous year, with the organization crediting SPAK convictions for the improvement (European Western Balkans, 2025).

Table 1: Key milestones in Albania's EU accession and reform trajectory (2014–2025)

Year	Milestone
2014	Albania granted EU candidate status (June)
2016	Constitutional amendments enacting justice reform (Article 148/dh); Law 95/2016 establishing SPAK adopted
2019	Special Structure against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) operational (19 December)
2020	Revised EU enlargement methodology introduced; six thematic clusters
2022	EU accession negotiations formally opened with Albania and North Macedonia (July)
2023	Tirana Berlin Process Summit (16 October); first such summit hosted in a Western Balkan country
2024	Reform Agenda under the Growth Plan endorsed (October); SPAK orders custody of former President Meta (October); Cluster 1 opened (15 October); decoupling from North Macedonia formalised
2025	Clusters 2 through 5 opened (April–November); first Growth Facility tranche disbursed (March); 6th European Political Community Summit hosted in Tirana (16 May)

Note. Compiled from European Commission Country Reports on Albania (2014–2025); European Commission (2025); European Parliament (2025); EEAS (2025).

The transmission mechanism that links these domestic reforms to Albania's bilateral and regional relations warrants explicit statement before the observable implications are examined, because the connection claimed under H1 is causal rather than merely thematic. The mechanism operates in three steps. In the first step, the vetting process and SPAK generate costly and verifiable institutional signals: dismissals, resignations, indictments and convictions are public, quantifiable and difficult to simulate, which distinguishes them from declaratory reform commitments. In the second step, EU institutions certify these signals through authoritative assessment instruments, a certification visible in the progressive upgrading of Country Report language and in the cluster-opening decisions that convert assessed reform performance into formal accession milestones. In the third step, certified credibility is converted into regional diplomatic capital: it underpinned Albania's selection as host of the first Berlin Process summit held in a Western Balkan country and of the 2025 European Political Community summit, it made the 2024 decoupling from North Macedonia defensible as a merit-based rather than a political decision, and it altered the terms on which neighbouring governments engaged with Tirana. Domestic reform therefore affects regional relations not directly but through the intermediating certification of the EU, whose assessments regional partners treat as informative about Albania's reliability and trajectory.

The causal chain from justice reform to enhanced regional credibility is supported by four observable implications. First, Country Reports increased the prominence of justice-reform achievements in their executive summaries year on year between 2019 and 2025. Second, all six accession clusters were opened between 15 October 2024 and 17 November 2025 at a pace unprecedented in EU enlargement history, with the fastest-sequencing performance occurring in the Fundamentals cluster where the justice reform results are most directly assessed. Third, Albania hosted the first Berlin Process summit ever held in a Western Balkan country (Bundesregierung, 2023), which is a positional outcome explicitly tied to reform credibility. Fourth, the Tirana platform produced concrete summit deliverables that included agreements on the recognition of professional qualifications and the announcement of the College of Europe campus in the capital. The four observable implications jointly support H1 against the rival explanation that Albania's enhanced regional position is attributable solely to diplomatic effort independent of substantive reform.

The evidence also reveals significant contradictions that complicate a straightforward success narrative. The 2024 criminal amnesty law, approved by the Albanian Parliament on 14 March 2024 with 116 votes in favour (Euronews Albania, 2024), generated explicit EU concern documented in the 2024 Country Report. The Commission notes that "the adoption of a broad criminal amnesty law led to 40 individuals convicted by SPAK courts and being fully pardoned and 65 others having their sentence reduced, which raises concerns" (European Commission, 2024, p. 5). Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2024 assessment classified Albania as a transitional or hybrid regime and recorded "no score changes in 2024", holding the Democracy Score at 3.79 out of 7 (Freedom House, 2024). The press freedom situation, assessed by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), improved from 99th globally in 2024 to 80th in 2025 (RSF, 2025), but remained among the least-advanced areas in EU assessment. This pattern, in which substantive reform achievement in the justice sector coexists with persistent governance deficits in media freedom, civic space and political competition, is consistent with Richter and Wunsch's (2020) reform-without-transformation thesis. The credibility gains documented under H1 are therefore real but rest on an uneven institutional foundation. This qualified credibility, substantive in the justice sector but resting on the uneven foundation just described, constitutes the input condition for the asymmetric bilateral dynamics examined in Section 4.2.

4.2 Asymmetric bilateral effects and rival explanations (H2)

Cross-unit comparison of Albania's three bilateral relationships supports H2, the proposition that EU conditionality produces asymmetric rather than uniform effects on bilateral relations. The three relationships display markedly different trajectories that the embedded multiple conditionality framework helps to make sense of.

The Albania-Kosovo relationship exhibited the most complex dynamics. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network has documented more than 158 bilateral agreements, memoranda and protocols signed between Albanian and Kosovan governments between 2014 and 2025 (Prishtina Insight, 2025), evidence of extensive technical cooperation. A visible political rift nevertheless emerged after 2023. The documentary record points to three conditionality-related divergences. First, Albania's participation in Open Balkan, which Kosovo's Prime Minister Kurti rejected as serving Serbian regional interests, created a diplomatic friction point rooted in differing strategic assessments of how conditionality pressures for regional cooperation should be operationalized. Second, Prime Minister Rama's pragmatic engagement with Serbia's President Vučić, facilitated by Open Balkan interactions and driven partly by conditionality incentives emphasizing good neighbourly relations, was viewed with suspicion in Pristina. Third, disagreements over the approach to the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue reflected deeper divergences about how EU conditionality should interact with unresolved sovereignty questions.

The June 2023 cancellation of the joint Albania-Kosovo government session deserves explicit attention because it constitutes a hard test for H2 against rival explanations. The ninth joint session, scheduled for 14 June 2023 in Gjakova, was cancelled at short notice by Prime Minister Rama on the day of the meeting (Kosovo Online, 2023). The proximate trigger was a phone call between Rama and the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, following the May 2023 mayoral elections crisis in Kosovo's Serb-majority northern municipalities. A purely conditionality-based account would not predict this specific timing. The proximate cause lies in the EU's broader management of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue rather than in Albania's domestic reform conditionality. The underlying divergence, however, was structurally conditioned by competing strategic calculations about how to operationalize EU conditionality demands for regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations. The tradition has not resumed by the close of the study period, despite continued technical cooperation at lower institutional levels. The episode supports H2 as a structural rather than a proximate causal claim: conditionality dynamics shape the strategic environment within which specific bilateral incidents unfold, even where the trigger of any individual incident lies outside conditionality narrowly defined.

Table 2: Asymmetric effects of EU conditionality on Albania's bilateral relations

Bilateral relationship	Conditionality dynamic	Observed effect (2022–2025)
Albania–Kosovo	Divergent strategic interpretations of regional cooperation conditionality (Open Balkan and Kosovo–Serbia dialogue)	Continued technical cooperation; political rift; joint government sessions suspended since June 2023
Albania–Serbia	Conditionality incentives for good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation	Pragmatic rapprochement through Open Balkan; constructive participation at the Tirana 2023 Summit
Albania–North Macedonia	Structural conditionality architecture (Council unanimity and procedural linkage)	Two-year delay due to Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia; formal decoupling on 15 October 2024

Note. Compiled from European Commission Country Reports (2022–2025); European Western Balkans (2024); Prishtina Insight (2025).

The Albania-Serbia relationship evolved along a different trajectory, shaped by pragmatic engagement that EU conditionality incentivized but did not unilaterally determine. Albania's participation in Open Balkan alongside Serbia represented a significant departure from the historically distant bilateral posture between the two countries. A rival explanation worth taking seriously is that this rapprochement reflects Prime Minister Rama's personal political style rather than conditionality dynamics, with conditionality language serving as discursive justification rather than causal driver. The documentary methodology cannot fully discriminate between these two interpretations, because Albanian government discourse during this period consistently framed engagement with Serbia in conditionality terms regardless of which causal logic actually drove the engagement. Three pieces of evidence nevertheless support the conditionality

interpretation as the more parsimonious of the two. First, the rapprochement intensified during the periods of most acute EU conditionality pressure for regional cooperation (2019–2020 and post-2022) rather than tracking the electoral cycle of Rama's Socialist Party. Second, comparable Rama-Vučić engagement was absent during the pre-2019 period before Open Balkan was launched, despite Rama having been in office continuously since 2013. Third, the Tirana Berlin Process summit in October 2023, in which both countries participated constructively, occurred precisely at the moment of intensified post-2022 enlargement momentum. A definitive discrimination between the two interpretations would require interview-based evidence on the timing and content of internal Albanian government deliberations, which is outside the scope of the present study and is identified in Section 5.4 as a future research priority.

The pragmatic Albania-Serbia rapprochement simultaneously strained the Albania-Kosovo relationship, which illustrates a structural trade-off embedded in conditionality frameworks that promote regional cooperation without accounting for asymmetric bilateral implications.

The Albania-North Macedonia relationship was most directly affected by the structural architecture of EU conditionality itself, rather than by substantive reform dynamics. The procedural linkage of the two countries' accession processes meant that Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia from 2020 to 2022 delayed Albania's own negotiations by approximately two years, a period during which Albania's reform momentum was maintained but could not translate into formal accession progress. The discomfort culminated in the formal decoupling of the two countries' accession tracks at the second intergovernmental conference with Albania on 15 October 2024 (European Western Balkans, 2024). This experience of conditionality collateral damage, in which one country's bilateral dispute with a member state blocks another candidate's progress, exposed a structural vulnerability in the enlargement framework's reliance on Council unanimity. The decoupling resolved the immediate blockage but also reduced a previously significant incentive for Albania-North Macedonia bilateral coordination on EU integration matters.

4.3 Strategic compliance prioritization under multiple conditionality (H3)

Analysis of the post-2024 period supports H3, the proposition that the simultaneous operation of multiple conditionality frameworks generates strategic compliance prioritization rather than uniform reform commitment. By 2025 Albania was navigating at least four distinct conditionality frameworks, each with its own institutional logic, reward structure, monitoring mechanism and compliance timeline. The empirical pattern matches what the policy-layering literature (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; van der Heijden, 2011) would predict: where new institutional rules are added alongside existing ones without harmonization, the resulting interaction generates outcomes that no individual designer fully anticipated.

EU accession conditionality, organized through six thematic clusters with detailed benchmarks, operates on the longest time horizon with the largest but most uncertain reward, full membership. The Berlin Process, with its annual summits and action plans including the CRM 2.0 (2025–2028), operates through voluntary commitments without binding enforcement, offering political recognition and connectivity investments. The Growth Plan Reform Agenda, with its 922.1 million euro allocation tied to 21 specific reform milestones and three disbursement channels (SASPAC, 2024), operates on the shortest timeline with the most direct financial rewards. CEFTA-based trade obligations add a fourth layer of regional economic conditionality with its own compliance monitoring.

Table 3: Multiple conditionality frameworks operating on Albania (post-2024)

Framework	Reward type	Time horizon	Enforcement
EU accession (six clusters)	Membership	Long (multi-year per cluster)	Binding; reversibility principle (untested in practice)
Berlin Process / CRM 2.0	Political recognition; connectivity investments	Medium (annual summit cycle)	Voluntary; no binding sanctions
Growth Plan Reform Agenda	Financial disbursements (€922.1 m through 2027)	Short (semi-annual tranches)	Conditional disbursement on milestone fulfilment
CEFTA	Market access	Ongoing	Treaty-based dispute settlement

Note. Compiled from European Commission (2023); European Union (2024); SASPAC (2024); Buscaneanu & Li (2024); Karagiannis & Kakarnias (2026).

Documentary evidence reveals that Albania's reform behaviour exhibits patterns consistent with strategic prioritization rather than uniform compliance. The Growth Plan, with its direct financial disbursements linked to measurable and time-

bound milestones, generated the most rapid compliance responses: Albania fulfilled all 21 initial reform measures (SASPAC, 2024) and received its first pre-financing tranche of 64.5 million euros within five months of the Reform Agenda's adoption in October 2024. Accession conditionality, with its longer time horizon and less tangible intermediate rewards, produced faster formal compliance in areas such as legislative harmonization but slower progress in areas requiring deep institutional change such as media freedom and civic space. Berlin Process commitments, which lack binding enforcement mechanisms and offer primarily reputational rewards, generated the most declarative compliance pattern, with ambitious communiqué language not always matched by implementation.

An alternative mechanism deserves explicit consideration. Albania's bureaucratic capacity for managing simultaneous accession negotiations, Growth Plan reporting cycles, Berlin Process commitments and CEFTA obligations is finite. The differential compliance pattern observed across the four frameworks could reflect administrative bandwidth constraints rather than, or in addition to, deliberate strategic optimization by political principals. The documentary methodology cannot fully discriminate between strategic prioritization and administrative bottleneck as competing mechanisms, because both predict similar observable behaviour: faster compliance with milestones offering immediate rewards and clearer measurement, slower compliance with more diffuse benchmarks. A complete account of conditionality layering would treat strategic optimization and administrative capacity as complementary rather than competing mechanisms, with the precise weighting between the two left to future research that combines documentary analysis with interviews of Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and Council of Ministers officials.

The layered conditionality environment generates what this study tentatively terms conditionality overload, a proposition that the multiplication of overlapping frameworks may produce compliance fatigue, strategic selectivity, and fragmentation of reform efforts. The 2025 European Commission Country Report's notation of Albania's continued challenges with cross-cutting reform coherence is consistent with such a dynamic, though a single qualitative case cannot establish the existence of a threshold effect. The qualitative evidence supports the weaker claim that conditionality layering creates strategic space for selective compliance across frameworks. Whether layering produces an actual reduction in reform depth and coherence beyond a specifiable threshold, as the policy-layering literature would predict (van der Heijden, 2011), is a question for future comparative and quantitative work.

4.4 The geopolitical credibility premium (H4)

Qualitative comparison of Country Reports before and after February 2022 supports H4, the proposition that geopolitical alignment functions as a supplementary credibility resource alongside normative reform performance. The comparison is based on close reading of the twelve annual reports rather than on systematic word-frequency content analysis. Three illustrative shifts in framing are visible in the documentary record.

First, the language used to describe foreign-policy alignment changed character. The 2020 and 2021 Country Reports described Albania's alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy in primarily technical terms, recording the percentage of EU declarations with which Albania had aligned and noting alignment with EU positions on specific country files. The 2024 Country Report records full alignment with EU restrictive measures against Russia and frames this alignment as evidence of Albania's commitment to a rules-based international order. The language of rules-based international order, alongside references to Albania as a reliable partner and a contributor to European security, did not appear in pre-2022 reports and appears in each post-2022 report.

Second, post-2022 reports explicitly contrast Albania's alignment with Serbia's partial alignment, a comparison that was either absent or muted in pre-2022 reports. The 2023, 2024 and 2025 Country Reports each note the divergence in CFSP alignment between the two countries as a factor relevant to assessment, which represents a qualitative shift in how alignment is connected to accession progress.

Third, post-2022 reports devote increased space to Albania's contributions to regional stability and to its hosting of European Political Community meetings, both of which are framed in security and geopolitical terms rather than as technical chapter compliance. Albania hosted the sixth European Political Community summit in Tirana on 16 May 2025 (Tirana Times, 2025), a high-visibility platform that no other Western Balkan country has provided.

Two rival explanations for the post-2022 acceleration deserve consideration. The first is that the acceleration is attributable entirely to Albania's justice reform achievements rather than to geopolitical factors. The documentary record does not support this purely normative interpretation, because the justice reform achievements predate the post-2022 acceleration by several years without producing equivalent acceleration during the 2018–2022 veto period. The second rival explanation is that the acceleration reflects the new enlargement methodology rather than geopolitical alignment. This explanation is undermined by the observation that the methodology had been operational since 2020 without

producing comparable momentum until after the geopolitical shock. The most parsimonious account combines all three factors: justice reform credibility, methodological reorganization and geopolitical alignment, with the third factor altering the weighting under which the first two are assessed. The premium does not eliminate normative conditionality but shifts its relative salience, in line with the broader theoretical argument advanced by Hunter et al. (2025) and Mesarovich and Schumacher (2025). A systematic word-frequency content analysis applying a fixed coding scheme to the full twelve-year corpus would strengthen the inference further; this is identified in Section 5.4 as a future research direction.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation in light of the existing literature

The findings confirm the External Incentives Model's emphasis on credibility as a master variable while challenging its unitary treatment of conditionality. Albania's reform acceleration correlates clearly with periods of enhanced membership credibility (the July 2022 negotiation opening and the post-2024 cluster advancement), while reform stagnation and frustration characterized the low-credibility veto period of 2018–2022. This temporal pattern aligns with the model's core prediction. The unitary treatment of conditionality nevertheless fails to capture Albania's actual reform behaviour, which operates as strategic portfolio allocation across competing conditionality demands. The findings support the claim that the External Incentives Model needs to be extended for contexts in which multiple conditionality frameworks operate simultaneously, in the direction the embedded multiple conditionality framework proposes.

Noutcheva's (2009) compliance typology proves particularly useful for interpreting Albania's pattern. The evidence suggests a hybrid compliance profile that combines elements of genuine compliance in the justice reform domain, where the vetting process was substantive and consequential in ways that cannot be dismissed as merely formal, with elements of partial compliance in governance areas where institutional change has been more superficial, such as media freedom and civic space. The criminal amnesty episode of March 2024 illustrates how genuine and formal compliance can coexist within the same political system. The Albanian Parliament pardoned 40 SPAK-convicted individuals and reduced the sentences of 65 others (European Commission, 2024, p. 5) through legislative action endorsed by 116 of 117 voting members (Euronews Albania, 2024). The episode demonstrates that reform commitment varies across policy domains and political moments in ways that resist simple categorization.

The stabilitocracy thesis (Bieber, 2020; Kmezić & Bieber, 2017) receives partial but qualified support. Albania's governance profile does exhibit features associated with stabilitocracy: democratic indicators that decline on certain dimensions even as EU accession progress accelerates. The Albanian case also challenges the concept's applicability in one important respect. Where Serbia's EU accession progress has been accompanied by overt authoritarian practices including electoral manipulation and media suppression, Albania's pattern is more nuanced. The formal institutional architecture of reform is substantive: the vetting process genuinely removed corrupt judges, and SPAK convictions rest on real investigations with real consequences. The political environment in which these institutions operate remains constrained by power concentration, limited media independence and narrow civic space. The pattern suggests that stabilitocracy may not be a binary condition but rather a spectrum, with Albania occupying a distinctive position on it.

The regional-relations findings warrant equally explicit interpretation, since they answer the core research question of the study. The asymmetric bilateral effects documented under H2 speak directly to the two literatures this article set out to bridge. The regional cooperation scholarship has largely treated cooperation frameworks as external structures whose effectiveness depends on inclusiveness, resources and enforcement (Bechev, 2017; Griessler, 2020; Töglhofer & Adebahr, 2017), while the conditionality scholarship has treated regional cooperation as one benchmark among many. The Albanian evidence shows instead that conditionality operates as a structural force inside the regional diplomatic field itself: it redistributes hosting rights and agenda-setting capacity toward the best-certified performer, it supplies the vocabulary through which bilateral choices are publicly justified, and it generates trade-offs between relationships that neither literature anticipates.

Each of the three bilateral patterns carries a distinct theoretical implication. The Albania-Kosovo rift demonstrates that shared conditionality does not harmonize allied candidates' regional strategies; where the operational meaning of good neighbourly relations is contested, as it was over Open Balkan and over the approach to Serbia, identical conditionality pressures produce divergent and even conflicting responses. The Albania-Serbia rapprochement shows the constructive face of the same mechanism: conditionality incentives for regional cooperation can reconfigure a historically distant relationship through pragmatic engagement, though at the documented cost of strain with Kosovo, a structural trade-off that current conditionality design does not register. The Albania-North Macedonia decoupling isolates a third

pathway in which the effect runs through the architecture of conditionality itself rather than through reform substance, with the Council unanimity requirement converting one candidate's bilateral dispute with a member state into collateral damage for another. Read together, the three patterns indicate that the domestic reform to regional relations nexus established under H1 is refracted through partner-specific conditions, which is why the credibility spillover documented in Section 4.1 coexists with the bilateral frictions documented in Section 4.2 rather than contradicting them.

5.2 Theoretical contribution: conditionality layering as policy layering

The study's primary theoretical contribution is the embedded multiple conditionality framework, which extends the External Incentives Model by importing analytical tools from the policy-layering literature in historical institutionalism. Streeck and Thelen (2005) and Mahoney and Thelen (2010) identified layering as one of four modes of gradual institutional change: the addition of new rules or institutions alongside existing ones rather than the displacement of the latter. Layering generates interaction effects that no individual designer fully anticipates. Béland (2007) demonstrated how layering produces policy drift when new rules pull institutional behaviour in directions inconsistent with the original rule set. Van der Heijden (2011) consolidated the concept across regulatory governance, showing that layered governance regimes tend to fragment authority and complicate compliance.

The contribution of the present study is to apply this analytical apparatus to the specific case of EU conditionality. Conditionality layering, the simultaneous operation of multiple conditionality instruments with differentiated reward structures and time horizons, generates four predictable consequences: conditionality multiplicity, reward differentiation, strategic selectivity and coherence risk. The framework does not displace the External Incentives Model. It specifies the scope conditions under which the model's unitary treatment of conditionality breaks down. The boundary condition is the presence of at least three simultaneous conditionality instruments with differentiated rewards. Below that threshold the External Incentives Model in its original form remains adequate; above it, the embedded multiple conditionality extension becomes analytically necessary.

Three observations would falsify or substantially revise the framework. First, evidence that candidate states subject to multiple conditionalities comply uniformly across all frameworks, rather than prioritizing reward-dense ones, would falsify the strategic-selectivity component (H3). Second, evidence that conditionality multiplicity reinforces rather than fragments reform efforts, producing greater coherence under more frameworks rather than less, would falsify the coherence-risk component. Third, evidence that Western Balkans candidate states are exceptional in this respect, and that conditionality layering does not produce similar patterns in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia or other contexts subject to multiple conditionality instruments, would substantially restrict the framework's scope. The present study, restricted to Albania, cannot test the third proposition; comparative work is required.

The second theoretical contribution is the empirical demonstration that EU-conditioned domestic reforms produce spillover effects on bilateral relations, and that these effects are systematically asymmetric rather than uniform. The Albania-Kosovo case demonstrates that shared conditionality pressures can produce divergent strategic responses that strain bilateral relations between allied states. The Albania-Serbia case shows that conditionality-driven regional cooperation incentives can reconfigure historically distant relationships through pragmatic engagement. The Albania-North Macedonia case reveals how the structural architecture of conditionality, specifically the unanimity requirement in Council, generates vectors of collateral damage that the conditionality framework does not anticipate. The three patterns establish the domestic reform to regional relations nexus as a productive empirical research object that bridges two previously separated literatures.

5.3 Practical implications

Three practical implications emerge from the findings. First, the EU should design conditionality mechanisms that account for their regional externalities. The current assessment framework evaluates countries individually against reform benchmarks but does not systematically assess how conditionality-driven changes in one country affect its relationships with neighbours. A regional impact assessment component within the annual Country Report cycle would address this gap and enable more calibrated conditionality design.

Second, the proliferation of conditionality frameworks requires better institutional coordination. The Growth Plan, Berlin Process, accession conditionality and CRM currently operate through different institutional channels within the EU architecture with insufficient alignment of benchmarks, monitoring cycles and reward mechanisms. The conditionality overload proposition advanced in this study, if validated by subsequent comparative research, suggests that

consolidation, or at minimum explicit harmonization, would reduce the compliance fragmentation and strategic selectivity that currently disperse reform energy across competing tracks.

Third, Albania's experience indicates that the geopolitical credibility premium, while strategically valuable for sustaining enlargement momentum in a security-challenged environment, carries risks if it substitutes for rather than supplements rigorous normative assessment. The coexistence of rapid formal accession progress with persistent democratic deficits in media freedom, civic space and political competition suggests that geopolitical alignment alone is an insufficient foundation for sustainable institutional transformation.

5.4 Limitations and directions for future research

Three limitations of the present study point directly to productive avenues for future research. The reliance on documentary analysis without primary interview data means that the study captures official and publicly documented dynamics rather than the informal political calculations that may drive decision-making behind closed doors. Future work that incorporates semi-structured interviews with officials directly involved in Albania's negotiations would complement and deepen the documentary analysis presented here, particularly with respect to discriminating between strategic prioritization and administrative capacity as competing mechanisms for the observed differential compliance pattern. The single-case design constrains external generalizability; comparative studies examining whether the domestic reform to regional relations nexus operates similarly in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine would test the embedded multiple conditionality framework's broader applicability. Finally, the quantitative operationalization of the conditionality overload proposition, which would involve measuring the number, intensity and contradictory demands of simultaneous conditionality frameworks and correlating these variables with reform outcomes across candidate countries, represents a promising direction for theory testing. A complementary line of work would apply systematic word-frequency content analysis to the Country Reports corpus to quantify the geopolitical framing shift documented qualitatively here.

6. Conclusion

The article has examined how EU-conditioned reforms in Albania reshaped the country's bilateral relations and regional positioning during the period 2014–2025. Through systematic thematic document analysis combined with structured causal-process observations across four critical episodes, the four hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework receive empirical support, although the strength of that support varies across the four hypotheses in ways that merit explicit statement. H1 rests on the firmest foundation: judicial reform and SPAK operated as credibility-building mechanisms with measurable regional spillover, an inference anchored in four independent and convergent observable implications drawn from a dense documentary trail. H2 is supported as a structural claim, most robustly for the Albania-North Macedonia dyad, where the procedural mechanism is directly documented, and for the Albania-Kosovo divergence, while for the Albania-Serbia rapprochement the documentary record favours the conditionality interpretation on parsimony grounds without fully excluding the leadership-style rival explanation. H3 is supported in its weaker form, the demonstration that framework multiplication creates strategic space for differential compliance, whereas the stronger conditionality overload proposition remains a tentative claim that awaits comparative testing. H4 receives qualitatively consistent but methodologically more provisional support, resting on close reading of framing shifts across the twelve Country Reports rather than on systematic content analysis. The credibility gains nevertheless rest on an uneven foundation that combines substantive institutional change in the justice sector with persistent governance deficits elsewhere.

The theoretical contribution, the embedded multiple conditionality framework, extends the External Incentives Model by importing analytical tools from the policy-layering literature and specifying the scope conditions under which the model's unitary treatment of conditionality breaks down. By establishing the domestic reform to regional relations nexus as an empirically tractable research object, the study opens a line of inquiry that bridges two literatures previously operating in isolation. The implications for conditionality design in the Western Balkans, where domestic transformation and regional stabilization remain interconnected policy objectives, warrant further empirical and comparative investigation.

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