

‘Behind the Veil of EU Enlargement’ Kin-State Politics and the Securitisation of National Minorities in the Greek-Albanian Dispute

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Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between EU enlargement, kin-state politics, and the securitization of national minorities, with the Greek-Albanian dispute (the “Beleri case”) as a case study. It argues that, when conflicts arise between an EU member kin-state and a candidate home-state, the unchecked exercise of veto powers, coupled with the lack of alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms, may turn enlargement into a catalyst for the politicization and securitization of national minorities. At the *EU level*, this undermines EU agency, credibility and commitment to uphold its fundamental values, particularly amid existential challenges and an expanding pool of candidate countries. At the level of kin-home state relations, asymmetrically enforced settlements of bilateral disputes strain inter-state relations and place a disproportionate burden on minority communities on both sides, thereby heightening the risk of future crises. Hence, drawing on Vasilev’s concept of “cosmopolitan kin-state activism”, international jurisprudence, and established best practices, this paper proposes targeted policy recommendations to foster bilateral remedies while reaffirming the overarching role of EU enlargement for resolving bilateral disputes, protecting minority rights, and preventing their securitization.

Keywords: Beleri Case; Greek Minority in Albania; Securitisation; EU Enlargement; Kin-State Activism.

Introduction

“In the person of Fredis Beleris, the Greek government sees all the Greek citizens, all the Greek ethnic minority in Albania, which we will continue to support”.²

In November 2023, Greece refused to sign the EU’s joint letter supporting the opening of Cluster One in Albania’s accession talks.³ The refusal was prompted by the arrest of Fredi

¹ The views expressed in the text are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of ELIAMEP.

² Statement of Pavlos Marinakis, Spokesman of the Greek government, to the daily *Kathimerini*. See: *Kathimerini*. 2024. [Ethnic Greek politician and MEP is released on probation in Albania](#). *Kathimerini*, 2 September 2024.

³ European Western Balkans. 2023. [Greece stalls Albanian EU accession talks due to Beleri case](#). *European Western Balkans*, 13 November 2023.

Beleri, the newly elected ethnic-Greek mayor of Himara, on charges of corruption and vote buying.⁴ Athens, which emphasises “*the protection of all members of the Greek minority throughout Albania as its foremost foreign policy priority*”⁵, condemned the detention as ethnically and politically motivated, denouncing the case as a significant ‘European issue’ and warning that Tirana’s EU path would remain stalled until Beleri had been released and allowed to take office.⁶ Athens’ stance drew criticism from the European Commission as well as from German Chancellor Scholz, who urged Greece “not to raise bilateral issues to the Union level,” while sparking heated political debates in Albania.⁷ On one hand, Prime Minister Rama dismissed Greek demands, presenting the case as “a matter of domestic justice in a sovereign country”⁸, and raising concerns over Beleri’s controversial past.⁹ On the other hand, it met the criticism of the Albanian opposition, with Democratic Party’s long-standing leader Sali Berisha accusing Rama of orchestrating Beleri’s arrest in order to protect his illegal interests in Himara’s tourism sector, at the cost of “crushing relations with Greece”¹⁰ and further derailing the country’s EU path.

The months-long deadlock took an unexpected turn in June, with Beleri’s election to the European Parliament on the ticket of Greece’s ruling party, New Democracy (ND).¹¹ Amid rising far-right support in Greece¹² – and with the pivotal parliamentary run-off of June 25 approaching – the Beleri case presented the executive with a timely opportunity to display its patriotic credentials and, in the words of ND’s interior minister Makis Voridis, to stand its ground against those who criticised the party’s candidate list as “too PASOK [historic Greek centre-left party.]”¹³ As such, PM Mitsotakis’ decision to endorse Beleri’s candidacy – who, once in Brussels, vowed to seek justice for the Greek minority¹⁴ – proved a scenographic move to kill two birds with one stone: securing legal immunity for the detainee and forcing Tirana to break the stalemate, and bolstering the executive’s appeal among an increasingly right-leaning electorate. Yet, the appointment of Himara’s detained mayor did not only face

⁴ Nedos, Vasillis. 2023. [Greece sets up first barrier against Albania](#). *eKathimerini*, 11 November 2023.

⁵ Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [Statement on the Greek Minority in Albania](#) (accessed: 25 November 2025). Italics by author.

⁶ Kathimerini. 2023. [Greek minister says ongoing Beleri detention a European issue, not bilateral](#). *Kathimerini*, 27 November 2023.

⁷ Euronews Albania. 2023. [Do not raise bilateral issues to EU level, says Stano as Greece does not agree to Albania’s EU accession process](#). *Euronews Albania*, 12 December 2023; Nedos, Vassilis. 2023. [Berlin backs Albania’s EU bid despite Athens’ opposition over jailed mayor](#). *Kathimerini*, 14 December 2023.

⁸ To Vima. 2024. [Albanian PM Rama ‘scolds’ Greece on justice as Beleri sits in prison](#). *To Vima*, 16 February 2024.

⁹ Tirana has linked Beleri to the paramilitary organization MAVI (Northern Epirus Liberation Front), active in Southern Albania and repeatedly accused him of involvement in terrorist actions. See: Gazeta Shqiptare. 2019. [Fredri Beleri questioned again: ‘I have no connection to the Peshkëpi massacre \[Fredri Beleri merret serish ne pyetje: S’kam lidhje me masakren e Peshkepise\]](#). *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 31 May 2019. In contrast, Greece maintains that Beleri’s only conviction was on charges of illegal weapons possession, following his arrest by Greek border guards in 1995. See: Mallias, Alexandros. 2024. [The Beleri case: The anatomy of a Kafkaesque drama \[Ypothesi Beleri: I anatomia enos kafkikou dramatos\]](#). *Kathimerini*, 13 February 2024.

¹⁰ According to Berisha, Beleri stood in the way of Edi Rama’s appropriation of the Gjipesë Canyon. See: Democratic Party of Albania. [Berisha to the Greek media: Why Rama fabricated the “Beleri issue” – Albania does not meet the criteria for the EU \[Berisha për median greke: Pse Rama sajoi “çështjen Beleri” – Shqipëria nuk i plotëson kriteret për BE\]](#) (accessed: 26 November 2025).

¹¹ Sinoruka, Fjori and Eleni Stamatouko. 2024. [Ethnic Greek politician Fredi Beleri released from Albanian prison](#). *Balkan Insight*, 2 September 2024.

¹² This is further reflected in the results of the 2023 parliamentary election, where far-right parties such as *Greek Solution* (4,48 %), *Spartans* (4,68 %) and *Victory* (3,70 %) entered parliament for the first time winning a total 34/300 seats. See: Greek Ministry of the Interior. [National elections – June 2023: Parties](#) (accessed: 26 November 2025).

¹³ Liberal.gr. 2024. [M. Voridis on Beleri’s candidacy: Greece’s message that we do not tolerate violations of the rule of law \[M. Boridis gia ypophiotita Belere: To memvna tes Elladas oti den anechochomaste ten parabiasē tou Kratous Dikaiou\]](#). *Liberal.gr*, 18 April 2024.

¹⁴ Papadopoulos, Pavlos. 2024. [Fredis Beleri: In Brussels I will raise the issue of Himara \[Fredis Beleri: Stis Vryxélles tha théso to théma tis Chimárras\]](#). *Kathimerini*, 9 September 2024.

the sharp criticism of Syriza, the main Greek opposition party, which, despite differing views on Beleri's track record, has largely criticised Mitsotakis of "exploiting the Greek minority in Albania for his own political gain".¹⁵ It was also met with "strong reservations" in the Hellenic government itself, with foreign minister Nikos Dendias and several MFA's top officials warning about the dangers of "playing politics" with the case.¹⁶

In the end, Athens eventually lifted its veto, allowing Tirana to proceed with accession negotiations. Yet, the forceful resolution of the crisis has left bilateral relations strained, increasing the risk of future blockades, and setting a troubling precedent for the EU enlargement process. Accordingly, this paper explores the Beleri affaire as a case of multi-dimensional relevance that demands close attention, particularly in relation to its closely intertwined minority rights and EU dimensions.

At the *minority rights* level, Athens's kin-state intervention elevated a single, controversial, judicial proceeding into a collective minority rights violation. Greece's concerns over the welfare of its kin in Albania may well be legitimate, especially considering documented evidence over an inadequate protection of Greek property rights in the Himara area – a growing tourist hotspot that has become a focal point of, often opaque, competing economic interests.¹⁷ However, it remains debatable whether unilaterally halting Albania's EU path represents a proportional response and, most importantly, one capable of fostering sustainable outcomes in the interests of the Greek minority. Conversely, as this paper will detail, it has rather amplified bilateral tensions, creating a fertile ground for securitisation, the process where "minority rights shift from being merely an issue of domestic politics and human rights to one of national security and international politics".¹⁸

It is relevant to emphasise – as underscored by scholars of the Copenhagen School – that securitisation unfolds well beyond the mere military sphere; it also operates at a 'micro' level, rooted in discursive politics and shaped through everyday social and political interactions. Drawing on Austin's speech acts theory, which qualifies speech acts as *performative* and *constructive* rather than merely *descriptive*, Wæver underscored how speech acts – such as political statements and visual language – play a crucial role in shaping fears and threat perceptions, moving certain issues into the realm of security.¹⁹ This particularly applies to national minorities which, as Paul Roe notes, serve as a powerful 'identity marker' within the nation-state system, a constitutive 'Other' to the titular group. As this paper will detail, both in Greece and Albania, the Beleri case has been defined by a highly politicised media framing, often driven by polarising, nationalist narratives. This bears the risk of exposing minorities on both sides to hate speech and discrimination, potentially fuelling a self-perpetuating vicious cycle of reciprocity in the respect of minority rights, as already observed

¹⁵ In. gr. 2024. [Barkas: Polakis is not SYRIZA \[Bárkas: O Polákis den éinai o SYRIZA\]](#). *In.gr*, 18 April 2024. Another Syriza MP (Pavlos Polakis) condemned Beleri's past, accusing Mitsotakis of turning 'Golden Dawn-like' in a desperate bid to win elections. See: Iefimerida.gr. 2024. [Polakis posted a recipe for octopus in a post against Mpeleri – Georgiadis' response \[O Polákis anébāse syntagē gia chtaπόdia se anártēsē katá tou Belerē – H apántēsē Georgiádē\]](#). *Iefimerida.gr*, 17 April 2024.

¹⁶ Stamouli, Nektaria. 2024. [Greece's government faces EU election wild card over jailed Albanian politician Fredi Beleri](#). *Politico*, 24 April 2024.

¹⁷ Kajana, Gjergji. 2017. [Albania and Greece: Himara, minority properties \[Albania e Grecia: Himara, immobili di minoranza\]](#). *Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso*, 21 November 2017.

¹⁸ Vasilev, George. 2019. The ethics of kin state activism: a cosmopolitan defense. *Ethics & International Affairs* 33(4), 395.

¹⁹ Wæver, Ole. 1989. [Security, the speech act: analysing the politics of a word \(Working Paper No. 1989/19\)](#). *Centre for Peace and Conflict Research*, June 1989.

in the past.²⁰ Most notably, it compromises the very Greek minority on whose behalf Athens intervened, which finds itself caught in the crossfire between politicisation by its kin-state and securitisation within its home-state. All while pressing systemic issues – like that of property rights – remain largely unaddressed.

At the *EU level*, Greece’s accession gatekeeping – echoed by Hungary’s ongoing veto threats against Ukraine over the rights of the Hungarian minority – has further exposed the vulnerability of enlargement to bilateral disputes. Indeed, while Brussels has shown a more proactive approach in mediating disputes between candidate countries (*horizontal disputes*), the lack of effective checks and balances and alternative dispute-resolution mechanisms becomes particularly impeding when tensions arise between a member state and a candidate country (*vertical disputes*). Here, member states’ threat or use of veto powers, rather than serving as an ‘atomic option’, has emerged as a default strategy, a potent tool to leverage power asymmetry and gain the upper hand in bilateral disputes.²¹ As a result, at times when crisis manufacturing proves most politically remunerative, minor inter-state grievances – often initiated unilaterally – can easily escalate into European concerns, deepening antipathies and taking enlargement hostage.²² All of this is clear, goes much to the detriment of EU credibility, especially at a time when Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has forcefully imposed enlargement as a “geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity”²³ in Europe.

Framing kin-state activism as “the eagerness of governments to support and shape the political causes of populations abroad whom they perceive as ethnic kin”²⁴, this paper engages with the CoE’s call for further research into the relationship between “EU integration and kin-state engagement in Southeast Europe”.²⁵ In doing so it examines “the extent to which states (mis)appropriate the idea of European unity for their own egoistic purposes, and the ways in which antagonisms might be transformed into approaches grounded in common values rather than particularistic national interests”.²⁶ Drawing on the Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities’ (ACFC) appeal for “smart, inclusive and fair policies to counter the instrumentalization and politicization of minority rights in Europe”²⁷, the concluding section incorporates Vasilev’s operationalization of ‘cosmopolitan kin-state activism,’ together with existing best practices and relevant international jurisprudence, to advance policy recommendations aimed at two complementary objectives: (1) upholding minority rights and preventing securitisation at the bilateral level; (2) enhancing the overall integrity, credibility, and predictability of the accession process.

²⁰ Most notably in 1993, when Greece responded to Albania’s expulsion of the Greek Archimandrite Chrysostomos – accused of promoting separatism among the Greek minority – by expelling thousands of undocumented Albanian workers, many of whom have reportedly been physically assaulted by Greek police. See: Amnesty International. *Albania: Human rights abuses by police. Report No. EUR 11/05/93* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

²¹ Armakolas, Ioannis. 2023. *The promise of European integration: Breathing new life into the settlement of bilateral disputes*. *Europe’s Futures*, 30 December 2023.

²² Marić, Josip. 2024. *Bilateral disputes and EU enlargement: A consensual divorce?*. *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, 2 May 2024.

²³ European Council. *The Granada declaration* (accessed: 26 November 2025), 1.

²⁴ Vasilev, *The ethics of kin state activism*, 410.

²⁵ Udrea, Andreea / Costantin, Sergiu, and Ljubica Djordjević. 2023. *Kin-state engagement and its impact on minority protection in Europe: Relevant findings for Southeast Europe*. *Council of Europe*, August 2023, 23.

²⁶ Udrea, Constantin, and Djordjević. *Kin-state engagement and its impact*, 23.

²⁷ Advisory Committee for the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities. *14th ACFC Biennial Activity Report* (accessed: 26 November 2025), 8.

The Nationalisation of Enlargement

Despite the absence of *ad-hoc* EU legislation, minority issues have long been at the forefront of EU enlargement rhetoric.²⁸ This stems from the fact that the “respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities”²⁹ is enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and, as such, is upheld by the Copenhagen Criteria – the set of requirements that applicant countries must fulfil to advance in the accession process and ultimately join the Union. Importantly, however, Article 49 TEU requires unanimity within the Council to open accession negotiations or admit new members. Through this mechanism, individual member states are ideally granted the opportunity to raise concerns over the effective compliance with EU conditions, substantially halting the accession process until relevant progress is made. At the same time, however, the ambiguity of treaty provisions renders the distinction between a *legitimate* and a *domestic interests-driven* deployment of exclusive veto powers largely arbitrary and discretionary. As a result, EU conditionality – “the offer of positive incentives as a reward for states who meet the EU’s demands to adopt certain rules”³⁰ – had often fallen into the hands of single member states, where it becomes a powerful bargaining tool for gaining the upper hand in the context of vertical disputes.

The threat of bilateralism precedes the Union itself – as famously underscored by De Gaulle’s vetoes against Britain’s accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1960s. However, within the ‘deeper’ and ‘wider’ framework of the nowadays EU, the abuse of unilateral vetoes has acquired even more striking proportions, becoming an entrenched practice which strikes at the very roots of the EU’s agency and credibility. This also stems from Brussels’ firm stance on bilateral disputes – shaped by Cyprus’ 2004 problematic accession – which has made preventing the “importing of further instability” a new imperative. Brussels’ position in this regard is reiterated in the EC’s 2018 Strategy Paper for the WB, which clearly warns:

*There are still important bilateral disputes between countries in the region which remain to be resolved. The EU will not accept to import these disputes and the instability they could entail. Definitive and binding solutions must be found and implemented before a country accedes.*³¹

Yet, despite its insistence on the settlement of bilateral disputes as a *conditio sine qua non* for membership, the EU has failed to provide a clear definition of what the term ‘bilateral dispute’ entails as well as to elaborate a “comprehensive strategy or institutional mechanism for disputes, covering both those between member states and candidate countries”.³² As a result, three main challenges arise in case of vertical disputes, which have paved the way for the ‘capturing’ of enlargement repeatedly observed in recent years:

²⁸ Sasse, Gwendolyn. 2005. EU conditionality and minority rights: translating the Copenhagen criterion into policy. *EUI Working Papers*, March 2005.

²⁹ European Union. Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (accessed: 2 December 2025), 326.

³⁰ Sedelmeier, Ulrich. 2011. Europeanisation in new member and candidate states. *Living Reviews in European Governance* 6(1), 1–52, 10.

³¹ European Commission. A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans (accessed: 2 December 2025), 3.

³² Čerimagić, Adnan, and Simon Blockmans. 2023. EU enlargement and the resolution of bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans. *Centre for European Policy Studies*, 10 July 2023, 3.

(1) The incentivisation of the use of unilateral veto powers as the “one and only weapon” to enforce a convenient settlement of bilateral disputes.³³ (2) The possibility for member states of unilaterally halting negotiations on grounds falling beyond the scope of accession criteria, such as history and identity. (3) The establishment of a *double-standard approach*, whereas Brussels’ efforts to mediate inter-candidate disputes – such as in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue or through the Berlin Process – fall at odds with the state of lawlessness which defines vertical ones.

In past years, scholars and think tankers have developed a new sense of awareness over the issue. Among them is Christophe Hillion, who already in 2010 denounced what he defined as the “*creeping nationalisation of EU enlargement*”.³⁴ He observed how enlargement, a *de jure* inter-institutional process, has *de facto* shifted into an intergovernmental one, easily held hostage by the national agendas of individual member states. Institutionally, Hillion contested the growing control of the Council – and thus the member states – who can delay or block a candidate's accession at any stage, whether pre-negotiation, negotiation, or accession. Most notably, the legal reforms introduced by the 2006 New Consensus on Enlargement have played a pivotal role in deepening the ‘national derive’ of enlargement, as they facilitated an unprecedented expansion of its regulatory framework. This turned the process into a ‘paradoxical creature’, where the rich body of rules involved in the accession process falls at odds with the scarcity of Treaty provisions which regulate it.³⁵ As a result, increased competencies over the approval and assessment of benchmarks significantly multiplied member states’ opportunities to unilaterally steer, or halt, negotiations, effectively positioning EU capitals as the ultimate arbiters, or gatekeepers, of enlargement.

Conditionality in Captivity: The Erosion of EU Credibility

Politicisation and nationalisation strike at the very heart of enlargement itself. Thus, although formally “a merit-based process, fully dependent on the objective progress achieved by each country”³⁶, enlargement has, in practice, evolved into a highly unpredictable and asymmetrical struggle where *vetocrats* hold the final say. Likewise, while accession conditionality – accompanied by clear and legitimate demands and sustained by “a credible prospect of membership once the relevant conditions have been met” – is intended to serve as a “key incentive and driver of transformation”³⁷, reality on the ground tells a very different story. Plagued by the unchecked interference of individual member states, enlargement has rather witnessed conditionality becoming a tool to entrench power imbalances and burdening the accession process.³⁸ As recently underscored by the European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), this, in turn, frustrates EU credibility and extinguishes its much-celebrated ‘magnetic pull,’ namely Brussels’ capacity to exert leverage and drive key domestic change in candidate countries.³⁹ The misuse of veto powers may generate short-term domestic gains at

³³ This is the expression used by a pro-government Greek newspaper to describe Athens’ veto against Albania in response to Beleri’s arrest. See: Stoukas, Michalis. 2023. *The unrepented and incorrigible Albania [I ametanoiti kai adiorthoti Albania]*. *Proto Thema*, 19 May 2023.

³⁴ Hillion, Cristophe. 2010. *The creeping nationalisation of the EU enlargement policy*. Stockholm: Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies (SIEPS), 1–62.

³⁵ Hillion, *The creeping nationalisation of the EU enlargement*, 7.

³⁶ European Commission. 2023. *Communication on EU enlargement policy and annex* (accessed: 26 November 2025), 16.

³⁷ European Commission. *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans* (accessed: 26 November 2025), 38.

³⁸ Djolai, Marika, and Zoran Nechev. 2018. *Bilateral disputes conundrum: Accepting the past and finding solutions for the Western Balkans*. *Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group*, 1 April 2018.

³⁹ European Parliament Research Service. *The Western Balkans and Turkey (Briefing)* (accessed: 26 November 2025), X–Y.

the member-state level, allowing incumbents to capitalise on sensitive themes and providing a shortcut to political advantage. Over time, however, this is likely to weaken EU leverage, embolden competing external actors and foster significant drawbacks – not just for ‘obstructed’ candidate countries, but also for gatekeeping member states and the Union as a whole.

The words of North Macedonia’s foreign minister – “how do you keep your hope when you feel that the principles on which the Union is based - solidarity, justice and unity – are not applied equally?”⁴⁰ – well summarise the current situation. It is indeed in Skopje that the ‘backlash effect’ of bilateral conditionality has proven most evident. Years of crossed vetoes, unmet expectations and unfulfilled promises, in exchange for painful – if not humiliating – reforms, have not led to tangible advancements on the path towards EU accession. Despite significant and tangible progress – including the historic resolution of the decades-long name dispute with Greece through the 2019 Prespa Agreement and the subsequent concessions to Bulgarian demands regarding language and identity – Brussels has fallen short of delivering on its enlargement commitments. This, in turn, has led to a significant loss of momentum in the accession talks of a country once celebrated as a frontrunner, fuelling a widespread sense of betrayal, which is confirmed by Eurobarometer’s data.⁴¹ Likewise, at the political level, the EU’s inertia penalised reform-oriented governments, opening the door to democratic backsliding and revanchist agendas.⁴² As a result, new instabilities are being projected in the region, as suggested by the victory of the far-right VMRO-DPMNE party in 2024, which has reignited bilateral tensions with Greece and Bulgaria through revisionist rhetoric.⁴³

Far from being archived as a ‘lesson learned’, the North-Macedonian saga presents three fundamental takeaways: (1) when the deployment of veto powers emerges as the primary mechanism of dispute resolution – particularly in areas unrelated to accession criteria, and in the absence of coordinated EU-level action capable of delivering tangible and predictable rewards upon fulfilment – the instrument loses credibility and legitimacy. (2) Asymmetrically enforced resolutions of bilateral disputes, lacking a foundation of mutual trust and credible commitment, are unsustainable in the long run and bear the risk of undoing previously achieved advancements. (3) Much like the proverbial act of ‘crying wolf’, as credibility fades, so does the EU’s capacity to counter genuine concerns.

Minorities as Leverage: A Dangerous Precedent

Scholars have extensively highlighted the unique potential of Europeanisation for de-securitising and reconstructing inter-ethnic relations, fostering a system of values and institutions where national minorities are not only protected, but also empowered.⁴⁴ To this end, the EU’s capacity to transcend traditional notions of national sovereignty and promote a shared understanding rooted in European supranationalism and multi-level governance is crucial. As Nancheva emphasises, Europeanisation emerges as a key breakthrough against traditional narratives of benefits and belonging as it ultimately enables to “re-narrate

⁴⁰ Gnev, Milan. 2024. *Skopje whines: We did everything, but they betrayed us*. *Fakti.bg*, 4 October 2024.

⁴¹ The survey reveals that only 54% of North Macedonia’s citizens express trust in the EU, while 58% consider EU accession a “good thing”, a stark decline compared to the 70% of 2019. European Commission. *Standard Eurobarometer 102 – Spring 2025: public opinion in the European Union* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

⁴² Damjanovski, Ivan, and Nenad Markovikj. 2020. The long road to Europeanization: North Macedonia’s contentious democratization between its democratic deficit and external involvement. *Southeastern Europe* 44(1), 53–85.

⁴³ Nellas, Demetris. 2024. *Greece reacts to North Macedonian president’s swearing-in speech*. *Ekathimerini*, 12 May 2024.

⁴⁴ Galbreath, David, and Joanne McEvoy. 2012. European organizations and minority rights in Europe: On transforming the securitization dynamic. *Security Dialogue* 43(3), 267–284.

minority identities as part of the political community of the state, not as its constitutive Other”.⁴⁵ Yet, as she warns, the extensive interference of ‘pre-European institutions’ in the accession process has reversed its de-securitisation potential. As a result, rather than fostering integrated societies, enlargement has often emerged as a powerful driver of polarisation and securitisation. This, it goes without saying, brings with it a plethora of negative effects hindering minority’s perception and participation within their home-states, chief among them discrimination, social exclusion and threats to freedom of self-identification.⁴⁶ In short, it fosters an environment wholly at odds with the “spirit of tolerance and intercultural dialogue” promoted by the FCNM.⁴⁷

As noted, New Consensus reforms have been instrumental in facilitating these dynamics, effectively positioning member states as the gatekeepers of the enlargement process. By granting them broad authority over the interpretation of accession benchmarks, they have, in practice, provided EU capitals with ‘emergency brakes’ to halt or steer negotiations at their convenience.⁴⁸ Moreover, in the absence of EU regulations on the use of veto powers, negotiations can be unilaterally frozen on grounds well beyond the scope of accession criteria – such as nationhood and identity – and remain highly vulnerable to political manipulation, as currently exemplified by Croatia’s veto on Montenegro’s closure of Chapter 31.⁴⁹ However, even if efforts were made to restrict the use of veto powers to the Copenhagen Criteria, sticking to the ‘moving target’ approach to accession benchmarks would still allow political grievances to ‘slip back through the window’ only to resurface under the guise of alleged breaches to the accession criteria, much to the detriment of a merit-based assessment of progress on the ground. This is most damaging when minority rights are at stake, and particularly in those cases where the responsibility to define what constitutes a ‘breach of minority rights’ rests with an EU member-kin state in dispute with a candidate home state. In such instances, the power asymmetry inherent in accession negotiations risks spilling over onto the fragile balance of kin/home state relations, turning accession conditionality into a tool for advancing kin-state agendas and exposing the weaponisation of national minorities as a political pawn. Nancheva voices clear concerns in this sense, denouncing the instrumentalisation of “narratives and institutional practices of Europeanisation” to advance “ostensibly nationalist agendas” as a primary driver of the securitisation of national minorities in Europe.⁵⁰

While this is true for the Beleri case, it equally applies to Hungary’s gatekeeping of Ukraine’s EU accession (and high-level cooperation with NATO) over alleged violations of the cultural and linguistic rights of ‘its’ minority in the Transcarpathia region. As Balogh and Kovály observe, the Hungarian-Ukrainian dispute unfolds in a context in which, following the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions – which Moscow justified as kin-state interventions – interethnic relations have markedly deteriorated, leading to a broader securitisation of minority rights

⁴⁵ Nancheva, Nevena. 2017. Securitisation reversed. Does Europeanisation improve minority/majority relations?, *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 65(1), 10–34, 16.

⁴⁶ Cereghini, Mauro, and Michele Nardelli. 2019. *Sicurezza*. Padova: Edizioni Messaggero.

⁴⁷ Council of Europe. 1995. Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (H(95)10). *Council of Europe*, February 1995, 3.

⁴⁸ Hillion, *The creeping nationalisation of the EU enlargement*, 26.

⁴⁹ Zagreb presented Podgorica with a set of ten conditions to be addressed before Montenegro can join the EU. Among these are the “the need for greater protection of the Croatian minority in Montenegro, particularly with regard to education”, the repeal of a 2024 Montenegrin parliamentary resolution on Jasenovac, which Zagreb views as historically revisionist, and the return of the training ship *Jadran* to the Croatian flagship. See: Wankiewicz, Paulina. 2024. Croatia sets conditions for Montenegro’s accession to the EU. *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, 13 December 2024.

⁵⁰ Nancheva, *Securitisation reversed*, 22.

issues in the country.⁵¹ This also affected the Hungarian minority, whose concentration along a small border strip, combined with the coincidence of the intensification of Budapest's kin-state activism with the first Russian invasion, fuelled Ukraine's fears of a 'Donbas scenario' – a narrative conveniently amplified by (pro)-Russian actors outside Transcarpathia.⁵² This securitised climate contributed to the adoption of the contentious 2017 Language Law, which restricted education in all minority languages and was condemned both by neighbouring countries – with Hungary warning of repercussions for Kiev's EU path – and by the CoE, which denounced the provision as “a major impediment to the teaching of national minorities”.⁵³

Even before its adoption, however, Budapest took little initiative to address Kiev's security concerns – a stance that Hattyey attributes to what he characterises as Hungary's national-conservative *Fidesz* government, “narcissistic” form of kin-state activism. Drawing on the Freudian concept of *collective narcissism*, he describes Hungary's kin-state policies as driven by the need to “emphasize the need to assert appropriate recognition for the ingroup's exceptionality”.⁵⁴ This, he argues, is reflected in a self-centred approach towards the host state, in which *anger*, *self-pride*, and *resentment* prevail over positive emotions such as trust, *empathy*, and *solidarity*. Anger, specifically, came to the forefront in 2017, whereas *Fidesz* further intensified unilateral kin-state initiatives – such as selective aid provisions and mass ‘passportisation’ campaigns – that had already strained its relations with Romania and Slovakia in the past and, notably, have often raised eyebrows among minority members themselves.⁵⁵ This has only deteriorated since 2022, exacerbated by Hungary's pro-Russian leaning and gatekeeping within both NATO and the EU regarding security guarantees and weapon supplies at a critical moment. This, in turn, has reinforced the vicious cycle between “the host state's assumptions about its attempts at secession, the intentions of its kin state, and the relationship between the kin state and the host state's prime enemy”, deepening the securitisation of the Hungarian minority.⁵⁶

It remains debatable whether ongoing Hungarian vetoes on Ukraine's EU accession can unlock any positive advancement – neither for war-torn Ukraine, where accession is far from imminent, nor for the Hungarian minority, which risks further descent into securitisation ground and, with increasing numbers fleeing to Hungary, might eventually disappear from its areas of traditional settlement.⁵⁷ Conversely, it rather appears as yet another attempt to engage in divisive politics and cultivate nationalist loyalties or, as Hattyey termed Budapest's blockade of Ukraine-NATO cooperation, an “anger outburst”.⁵⁸ While respect for minority and human rights is a non-negotiable EU fundamental, veto powers shall not become a pretext to shield unwillingness to make any concession, without which de-securitisation is virtually impossible. This particularly applies for Ukraine, where real and perceived security threats have decisively shaped the curtailment of minority rights,

⁵¹ Balogh, Peter, and Katalin Kovály. 2025. Small but salient: The securitization of Ukraine's ethnic Hungarian minority. *Nationalities Papers* 53(4), 798–821, 801.

⁵² Balogh and Kovály, *The securitisation of Ukraine's ethnic Hungarian minority*, 813.

⁵³ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. *The new Ukrainian law on education: A major impediment to the teaching of national minorities' mother tongues* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

⁵⁴ Hattyey, András. 2024. Collective narcissism and Hungary's kin-state policy after 2010. *Nationalities Papers* 52(5), 1121–1137, 1124.

⁵⁵ Hattyey, *Collective narcissism and Hungary's kin-state policy*, 1130.

⁵⁶ Balogh and Kovály, *The securitisation of Ukraine's ethnic Hungarian minority*, 23.

⁵⁷ Ridgwell, Henry. 2024. *Politics, war drive depopulation in Ukraine's ethnic Hungarian villages*. *Voice of America*, 28 February 2024.

⁵⁸ Hattyey, *Collective narcissism and Hungary's kin-state Policy*, 1123.

suggesting that dialogue and trust-building within the multilateral framework of Europeanisation would be far more effective than a unilateral veto – especially when imposed by a kin-state that has itself contributed to deepening the cycle of securitisation. Alternatively, when member–kin states act in ‘bad faith’, prioritising political gain over a genuine commitment to the welfare of their kin abroad, they undermine the EU’s capacity to uphold fundamental values and ‘soften’ bilateral grievances, deteriorating bilateral relations and fuelling a ‘boomerang effect’ that ultimately entrenches the securitisation of the very minorities they claim to protect.⁵⁹

The ‘Belersisation’ of Greek Foreign Policy

Among EU members, Greece maintains the closest ties with the WB, defined by substantial economic exchange, long-standing socio-cultural linkages, and significant geopolitical interdependence. Similarly, as the oldest member state of the region, Greece has also been one of the most vocal supporters of EU enlargement in recent years, viewing the process as a guarantee of regional stability, a “*win-win outcome for both the EU and all newly integrated states*”.⁶⁰ This, however, falls at odds with Athens’ several disputes with WB countries (North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo), making its engagement highly ambivalent. The track record of Greek vetoes – against Turkey in the 1990s, later against North Macedonia, and most recently against Albania – is clear in the sense that “perhaps more than any other EU member state, Greece has used enlargement for its own ends”.⁶¹

As scholars emphasise, the nationalisation of enlargement is a widely legitimised practice at the level of Greek political culture. A front-line country with distinct security sensitivities, Greece wants to see its concerns acknowledged and addressed at the European level. While Athens’ stance originates from its long-standing security concerns towards Turkey, over time it has also come to define its relations with the WB.⁶² Here, Greek foreign policy has consistently sought the delicate balance of, on the one hand, exploiting EU veto powers in order to “punch above its weight” in vertical disputes with its neighbours, and, on the other, not excessively compromising broader enlargement endeavours.⁶³ According to Ioakimidis, this tendency has been further amplified by the informal dynamics of Greek foreign-policy-making, where the disproportionate influence of public opinion, alongside a low degree of institutionalisation, has often allowed for the dominance of single political personalities as well as individual or party-level considerations.⁶⁴ In this context, ‘nationalist outbidding’ – the process by which political parties adopt extreme ideological positions to boost their domestic appeal in times of hardship – has emerged as an entrenched and almost inevitable outcome, with irrational and impulsive foreign policy decisions taking precedence over long-term national interests.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Liebich, Alexandra. 2021. *The “Boomerang Effect” of kin-state activism: Cross-border ties and the securitization of kin minorities*, in *Securitized borderlands*, edited by Deleixhe, Martin / Dembinska, Magdalena, and Iglesias Julian Danero. London: Routledge, 26–45.

⁶⁰ Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos’ statements to Greek journalists in Tirana* (accessed: 26 November 2025). Italics by author.

⁶¹ Ker-Lindsay, James / Armakolas, Ioannis / Balfour, Roberta, and Corina Stratulat. 2017. The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17(4), 511–522, 517.

⁶² Sotiropoulos, Dimitris. 2024. *Greece’s response to the challenges of deepening EU integration and further enlargement*. *Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)*, May 2024.

⁶³ Armakolas, Ioannis, and Giorgos Triantafyllou. 2017. Greece and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: Understanding an ambivalent relationship. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17(4), 611–629, 617.

⁶⁴ Ioakimidis, Panagiotis. 2003. *The foreign policy planning model in Greece: Agents versus institutions*, in *Contemporary Greek foreign policy: A comprehensive approach* (1st vol.), edited by Tsakonias, Panagiotis. Athens: Sideris, 91–136.

⁶⁵ Armakolas and Triantafyllou, *Greece and EU enlargement*, 3.

This was particularly evident during the Syriza administration (2015–2019), which domestically leveraged the ‘name dispute’ with Skopje as a means of diverting public attention from the harsh austerity measures being implemented – a strategy labelled by domestic observers as the ‘Skopjanisation’ of Greek foreign policy.⁶⁶ Today, a similar pattern appears to be re-emerging, with many denouncing the ongoing ‘Belersisation’ of Greece’s foreign agenda and the analogous exploitation of EU membership as an echo chamber for party politics.⁶⁷ As noted, this unfolds in a context of growing far-right influence which, coupled with Mitsotakis’ need to accommodate right-leaning factions within ND itself – such as the one led by former PM Antonis Samaras, who has frequently criticised the party leadership, most recently for “pursuing an acquiescent foreign policy” while “Hellenism is under pressure on all fronts”⁶⁸ – has made nationalist outbidding in relations with Albania increasingly advantageous. This time, however, a crucial distinction arises: Greece’s proverbial ambiguity towards the WB overlaps with its role – and the associated ethical and legal responsibilities – of a kin-state towards the 25.000 Greeks of Albania.

The Greek Minority in Albania: 30 Years of Precariousness

Mylonas’ findings on the role of the Greek minority in Albania in Athens’ foreign policy strategies provide a coherent framework for addressing current developments. As he argues, Greece has laid the foundations for the political instrumentalisation of its kin in Albania following the collapse of Tirana’s communist regime in the early 1990s, when Athens pursued a markedly unfavourable migration policy towards Albanian Greeks – especially when contrasted with the generous measures introduced to encourage Greeks from the recently dissolved USSR to relocate to Greece.⁶⁹ The *ratio* was that of preventing unfavourable demographic shifts that could have hindered the kin-state’s capacity to exploit its co-ethnics abroad as a proxy, as a source of leverage in bilateral relations.⁷⁰ An aim clearly displayed in several instances throughout the last decades, when Greece tolerated the disruptive and polarising influence of non-state actors among Greek Albanians, turning a blind eye to the promotion of irredentist and revisionist agendas.

This, in turn, has periodically escalated tensions with Albania, with a climax in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the near-civil war conditions in the country and the broader picture of regional instability facilitated the emergence of subversive groups and intensified nationalist campaigning by the Greek Orthodox Church in Greek-inhabited territories.⁷¹ A CIA intelligence memorandum recalls the alarming picture of those years, denouncing how “Albania’s fear of Greek irredentism” had been fuelled by “Athens’ failure to rein in extreme nationalists who seek to stir up the Greek minority”, emphasising how this reinforced “Albanian suspicions that the main ethnic-Greek political organisation in Albania [*Omonia*, of which Beleri was already a member] is manipulated by Greece”.⁷² In a similar fashion,

⁶⁶ Tziampiris, Aristotle. 2017. *Foreign policy against austerity: Syriza’s multifaceted experiment*, in *Foreign policy under austerity: Greece’s return to normality?*, edited by Litzas, Spyridon, and Aristotle Tziampiris. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 261–292, 273; Armakolas, Ioannis, and George Sjakas. 2022. “Why did it take so long?” Exploring Greek public opinion as an obstacle to the settlement of the Macedonia name dispute. *Nationalities Papers* 50(3), 569–588.

⁶⁷ Karpozilos, Kostantinos. 2023. On the “Beleroipoiesis” of Greek foreign policy and Northern Epirus [Peri «Beleroipoiesis» tis ellinikis exoterikis politikis kai tis Voriou Ipeirou]. *News24/7*, 21 December 2023.

⁶⁸ Kathimerini. 2025. Former PM Samaras accuses Mitsotakis of ‘appeasement’ and strategic ‘absence’. *Kathimerini*, 17 May 2025.

⁶⁹ Mylonas, Harry, and Marko Žilović. 2017. Foreign policy priorities and ethnic return migration policies: Group-level variation in Greece and Serbia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(4), 613–635.

⁷⁰ Mylonas and Žilović, *Foreign policy priorities and ethnic return migration policies*.

⁷¹ Michas, Takis. 2003. *Unholy alliance: Greece and Milosevic’s Serbia during the 1990s*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

⁷² Central Intelligence Agency. *Albania’s Greek minority: Potential for trouble* (accessed: 26 November 2025), 1.

Minorities at Risk denounced Greek governments' "use [of] nationalism as political capital for diversionary and electoral benefits", warning that "the combination of a desperate group with an organised and powerful supporter can lead to greater volatility".⁷³

As these sources suggest, moments of heightened bilateral tensions and kin-state interference have historically triggered a 'boomerang effect' leading to the *hard securitisation* of the Greek minority, a process which scholars attribute to "aspirations for territory and demands for political autonomy".⁷⁴ Tirana's authorities responded to perceived threats by cracking down on fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, association and political participation. Notable examples include the legal limitations imposed on ethnic Greek parties during the 1992 elections and the sudden closure of certain Greek-language classes the following year – actions that Tirana justified as retaliation against Greek interference in its internal affairs.⁷⁵

Setting the intergovernmental perspective aside, similar developments have also hindered the perception and participation of ethnic Greeks in Albanian society. In this regard, however, much like in Greece and other parts of the region, Albania's educational system has played a highly disruptive role. Indeed, rather than pursuing its potential to reconstruct inter-group relations, education has historically served to 'fortify the nation,' entrenching prejudices against the ethnic 'Other'.⁷⁶ Above all, Greece as a major threat to Albania's sovereignty. The negative portrayal of Greece and the Greeks in Albanian curricula is convincingly demonstrated by Peshkopia and Giakoumis, who found that anti-Greek sentiments in Albanian public opinion significantly exceed those directed at homosexuals, despite the persistence of widespread homophobia in the country.⁷⁷ According to the authors, this largely stems from the fact that, while Greeks are repeatedly and predominantly negatively referenced in Albanian textbooks, homosexuals receive little to no mention, leading to the troubling conclusion that longer exposure to the Albanian education system predicts lower feeling temperature towards Greece and Greeks. Notably, although education-induced hostility appears primarily directed at mainland Greeks, the 'hostile Other' par excellence, entrenched prejudices risk having destabilising effects on Albanians' attitudes towards the Greek minority. Above all, by fostering a socio-political environment in which bilateral crises are amplified, and securitisation is more likely.

NGOs and watchdog organisations have often illustrated this reality, denouncing how bilateral confrontations between Athens and Tirana have repeatedly sparked 'artificial divisions' and fuelled 'increased tensions' between local Greek and Albanian communities, fostering a climate of "actual and potential discrimination and hostility toward the Greek minority".⁷⁸ This, in turn, has historically led to several ethnically motivated incidents, including the murder of a Greek youth in Himara, and multiple instances of police brutality targeting Greek minority members.⁷⁹ Similar escalations have also had dramatic

⁷³ Minorities at Risk Project. *Greeks in Albania: Minorities at risk assessment* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

⁷⁴ Nancheva, *Securitisation reversed*, 12.

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch. *Human Rights in Albania* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

⁷⁶ Giakoumis, Kostantinos, and Ilir Kalemaj. 2017. *Fortifying the nation: The image of the Greeks in Albanian history textbooks (1945–1990)*, in *Myths and mythical spaces: Conditions and challenges for history textbooks in Albania and South-Eastern Europe*, edited by Lichnofsky, Claudia / Pandelejmoni, Enriketa, and Darko Stojanov. Göttingen: V&R unipress, 195–224.

⁷⁷ Peshkopia, Ridvan, and Kostantinos Giakoumis. 2021. Nationalistic education and its colourful role in intergroup prejudice reduction: Lessons from Albania. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 21(3), 457–480.

⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch. *Country report: Human Rights in Albania* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

⁷⁹ Amnesty International. *Albania: Human rights abuses by police. Report No. EUR 11/05/93* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

repercussions on several Albanian nationals residing in Greece, fuelling episodes of discrimination and retaliatory measures from Athens – such as the mass expulsion of over 70,000 Albanian workers in 1994 – and reinforcing a concerning pattern of *reciprocity*, in which domestic respect for minority rights is contingent upon the treatment of kin minorities abroad.⁸⁰

Hate Speech and Discrimination: The Beleri Case in Greek & Albanian Societies

Greek-Albanian relations have generally improved throughout the last two decades, leading to a steady decline in instability and violence. This can largely be attributed to advancements in European integration, the broader stabilisation of the region, and the proliferation of bilateral cooperation initiatives. Yet, while *hard securitisation* patterns have significantly diminished, *soft securitisation* risks, which Nancheva associates with limited access to economic opportunities, constraints on the expression of collective identity, and weakened social cohesion, remain.⁸¹

While access to economic life remains constrained by Tirana's persistent shortcomings in the spheres of property rights, public attitudes and perceptions towards the Greek minority within Albanian society also remained an issue of concern. ELIAMEP's 2016 warning that Greece's repeated obstructions of Tirana's EU accession could "potentially heighten anti-Greek sentiment"⁸² in Albania, and 2021 assessment that "the positive image and impact of Greece in Albania will decrease in the future, if there are no corrective moves"⁸³, further suggests the Beleri case might have had a destabilising effect in this sense. Although assessing the full impact of recent developments remains challenging due to limited data, harsh rhetoric, the persistent threat of new vetoes, and the intertwining of political interests with sensitive minority issues all seem to lead in this direction. The latest ACFC Opinion on Albania reinforces this, expressing concern over "stereotyping and hate speech" in textbooks and on social media and urging national authorities to address the rise in "hostile incidents" targeting the Greek minority through the promotion of "a spirit of mutual respect and intercultural dialogue, especially through the media".⁸⁴

Yet, contrary to the ACFC assessments, the framing of the Beleri case in both Albanian and Greek media and political discourse was strongly defined by hate speech and disinformation, as indicated by several documented instances of fake news and photo manipulation.⁸⁵ This has also been signalled by a detailed ELIAMEP analysis of dominant media frames of the crisis, highlighting the primary role of political actors in shaping public discourse through 'ethnocentric filters' and an often dichotomic 'us' versus 'them' depiction of events.⁸⁶ In Albania, for example, pro-governmental media have often "invoked nationalist narratives to

⁸⁰ Minority Rights Group International. *Albanians in Greece* (accessed: 26 November 2025); Erebara, Gjerbj. 2018. Albania-Greece relations deteriorate after killing. *Balkan Insight*, 1 November 2018.

⁸¹ Nancheva, *Securitisation reversed*, 12.

⁸² Armakolas and Triantafyllou. *Greece and EU enlargement*, 11.

⁸³ Armakolas, Ioannis, and George Sjakas. 2021. *Albanian public opinion attitudes towards Greece: Trends and prospects*. *Hellenic Foundation for Foreign & European Policy*, 19 February 2021, 1.

⁸⁴ ACFC. 2023. *Fifth Opinion on Albania*. *Council of Europe*, 6 June 2023, paragraph 91. Italics by author.

⁸⁵ Of particular concern was the case of digitally altered image showing Beleri embracing a machine gun and Albanian media's purposeful mistranslation of Beleri's statements. See: Faktoje. *Disinformation and politicization surrounding the Fredi Beleri case* (accessed: 2 December 2025); ALGREE Albania-Greece: Understanding. Connecting. Partnering. 2024. *3rd Media observatory report*. *Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)*, 13 December 2024.

⁸⁶ Paschalidis, Panagiotis, and Kriton Kuci. 2025. *Mapping the dominant media frames between Greece and Albania and exploring alternative frames to override negative stereotypes*. *Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)*, 2 July 2025.

reinforce their position on Beleri's arrest as a matter of national integrity".⁸⁷ Nevertheless, much like in Greece, large segments of the opposition harshly criticised governmental nationalist outbidding, dismissing it as a way to "shift attention from the real problems of Albania".⁸⁸ Specifically, they reiterated that the Beleri case has little to do with the alleged charges of vote-buying or ethnic discrimination, and is instead a symptom of Albania's broader authoritarian drift, in which "power is strategically employed to suppress dissent – particularly in areas like Himara, where the opposition is likely to perform strongly".⁸⁹

While opinion polls have not yet been conducted in Albania, those carried out in Greece following the outbreak of the crisis have notably captured the impact of the 'Beleri effect' on public opinion: an alarming rise in anti-Albanian sentiments and the delineation of a "strongly negative attitude and concern" among Greek citizens concerning the "broader status of the Greek minority".⁹⁰ It is therefore plausible that, also in Albania, similar *inputs* (politicisation and polarisation) have led to comparable *outcomes* (a rise in anti-Greek feelings). The most recent survey (2021) on inter-ethnic relations in Albania painted an overall improving picture and signalled renewed momentum in Athens–Tirana relations. Nonetheless, it also revealed that 15% of Albanians openly perceive the Greek minority as a potential security threat.⁹¹ As recent qualitative evidence suggests, the Beleri case may have exacerbated the situation. Tellingly, indeed, Albanian fact-checking organisation *Faktoje* denounced how dominant narratives "transformed the sensitive issue of the Greek minority into a potent political tool for attracting attention and support". In a similar vein, also ELIAMEP warned that the politically charged media landscape that defined the crisis has had a "counterproductive development" on trust between the two countries, appearing to have "derailed and destabilized" the significant progress made at both political and societal levels, potentially sparking a "negative spillover effect"⁹² affecting all areas of cooperation, including inter-group relations.

Linking developments on the ground with academic literature – much like Peshkopia and Giakoumis' study on nationalist education – the above-mentioned sources further underscore the enduring role of nationalist narratives and fear-mongering in shaping public attitudes toward the ethnic 'Other'. This resonates with Wæver's understanding of securitisation as an essentially discursive process, in which speech acts play a central role in shaping public perceptions of threat. Nevertheless, as Balzacq emphasises, securitisation ultimately remains an interactive, audience-centred process, whose outcome is contingent on the audience's (*referent object*) willingness to accept the security threats constructed by political elites (*securitising actor*).⁹³ Hence, it becomes clear that any roadmap to advance the de-securitisation of national minorities in Greek-Albanian relations must adopt a dual, holistic approach: tackling securitising narratives at their political source while simultaneously strengthening societal (audience) resilience at the grassroots level.

⁸⁷ Paschalidis and Kuci, *Mapping the dominant media frames*, 70.

⁸⁸ Balkanweb. 2023. [Rama's campaign language and Beleri's arrest in Himarë. Mediu: The ruling party buys votes and intimidates citizens.](#) *Balkanweb*, 12 May 2023.

⁸⁹ Paschalidis and Kuci, *Mapping the dominant media frames*, 70.

⁹⁰ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. [Results of the opinion survey on Greek-Albanian relations](#) (accessed: 26 November 2025), 1.

⁹¹ Armakolas, Ioannis / Sjakas, George / Berzani, Alketa, and Klodian Seferaj. 2021. *Relations between Albania and Greece*. Athens: Open Society Foundation for Albania (OSFA) & Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP).

⁹² Paschalidis and Kuci, *Mapping the dominant media frames between Greece and Albania*, 76.

⁹³ Balzacq, Thierry. 2005. The three faces of securitization: Political agency, audience and context. *European journal of international relations* 11(2), 171–201, 177.

Breaking the vicious cycle, however, remains virtually impossible under the current EU accession framework of institutionalised asymmetry. Thus, building on a twofold narrative, the concluding chapter offers practical and sustainable recommendations aimed at: (1) promoting impactful, long-term progress at the bilateral level; and (2) advancing a comprehensive reorganisation of the EU's approach to vertical disputes, thereby unlocking the full de-securitising potential of Europeanisation.

A Roadmap for De-Securitisation in Greek-Albanian Relations

The OSCE Bolzano Recommendations of 2008 stem from the pressing “need for greater clarity on how states can pursue interests regarding national minorities abroad without endangering peace”.⁹⁴ To this end, they provide a non-legally binding code of conduct grounded in a “security-through-justice”⁹⁵ approach to minority rights in interstate relations. While kin-states may have a ‘legitimate interest’ in their co-ethnics abroad, the sovereignty of the home state – which carries the primary responsibility for protecting minority rights – must be fully upheld. Accordingly, only finely balanced and coordinated kin-state involvement can have a constructive impact and avoid securitisation backlashes.⁹⁶ Alongside ACFC jurisprudence, the Recommendations provide valuable guidance to reshape bilateral engagement in the post-Beleri context. For Albania, this primarily entails addressing shortcomings, legal, and capacity gaps affecting ethnic-Greeks and creating pretexts for detrimental kin-state involvement. For Greece, addressing domestic inconsistencies that undermine the legitimacy of its kin-state claims and embracing a collaborative, humanitarian-centred approach. For both parties, it commands credible steps to move beyond politicisation and cultivate a climate of trust and cooperation, so minorities become bridges, not divisions.

Building Trust and Understanding

Vasilev envisions a ‘cosmopolitan’ ideal of kin-state activism, advancing “a general human solidarity premised on supportive relations across state boundaries,” in stark contrast to its detrimental ‘narcissist’, or irredentist, counterparts.⁹⁷ As such, cosmopolitan kin-state activism is informed by an “ethic of transitional conduct” which, *inter alia*, conceives trust-building measures as a primary tool for fostering the “de-securitization of interstate and minority-state relations, creating conditions favourable for the reinterpretation of minority rights.”⁹⁸ Yet, while trust and understanding are the most valuable antidotes to the securitisation of minorities in home/kin-state relations, they have often been absent in Greek-Albanian relations, notwithstanding the numerous opportunities at hand for both sides to generate positive spillover effects. Athens, for instance, never formally revoked the 1940 Declaration of War, reportedly out of concern over potential compensation claims. Terminating the virtual state of war would be a powerful display of commitment to EU values and good neighbourliness, fostering new momentum in bilateral relations. Similarly, in the Beleri case, Greece has lamented a lack of transparency from the side of Albanian authorities and insufficient involvement in the judicial process surrounding the case. Once again, similar demands for transparency and accountability are widely shared by Albanian opposition and civil society, as well as by the EU. In this context, disclosing relevant reasoning and

⁹⁴ High Commissioner on National Minorities. 2008. Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations & Explanatory Note. *Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*, June 2008, 2.

⁹⁵ Sabanadze, Natalie. 2009. The Bolzano Recommendations on national minorities in inter-state relations: reconciling justice and security. *Security and Human Rights* 20(4), 307–317, 308.

⁹⁶ Sabanadze, Natalie. 2006. Minorities and kin-states. *Helsinki Monitor* 17(3), 244–256, 244.

⁹⁷ Vasilev, *The ethics of kin state activism*, 398.

⁹⁸ Vasilev, *The ethics of kin state activism*, 403.

information with Greece would not only be a constructive and symbolic signal to move bilateral relations ahead, but a much-needed step to strengthen domestic oversight.

Addressing Domestic Gaps and Shortcomings

The inadequacy of national legal frameworks, combined with flawed administrative practices, often proves detrimental to the welfare of national minorities, creating fertile ground for ethnic-based discrimination and straining kin/home state relations. This is particularly clear in Albania, where widespread legal and administrative shortcomings have often created pretexts for external kin-state interference in minority affairs. Against this backdrop, the adoption in December 2024 of the three remaining by-laws related to free self-identification of persons belonging to minorities, in line with Article 3 of the FCNM, is a much welcome step – especially after both the ACFC and the Committee of Ministers urged their adoption “without further delay.”⁹⁹ By significantly reducing bureaucratic barriers and imposing a 30-day deadline for official recognition, the newly adopted provisions mark a meaningful step toward enabling the right to self-identification – a right that, until now, has largely remained on paper. In light of this, and while cautioning that their ultimate effectiveness will depend on proper implementation, the EC has positively welcomed their adoption.¹⁰⁰ This was also well received in the Greek media, with *Kathimerini* describing it as a “positive shift” in bilateral relations – one which, particularly in the aftermath of the Beleri case, “raises hopes for further cooperation on contentious issues.”¹⁰¹

Albania’s need to reduce over-reliance on kin-state support when it comes to the operationalisation of minority rights is equally compelling. As Sabanadze points out, recognising a special role for the kin-state can negatively impact inter-ethnic relations in a multi-ethnic state. Namely, it creates a pathway for kin-state interference, potentially driving securitisation, and risks penalising minorities lacking kin-state support, deepening social divisions and inequalities.¹⁰² This has been the case for Albania, and particularly in the fields of educational and cultural rights, where Giakoumis identified a situation of structural *outsourcing* of minority rights.¹⁰³ Indicatively, the issue was repeatedly raised by the ACFC, which stressed that “Albanian authorities should not see [bilateral] co-operation [with Greece] as a reason for not taking further concrete actions”¹⁰⁴, and calling upon national authorities to provide appropriate funding in the fields of education and access to healthcare.

On the other hand, the credibility of Greece as a kin-state would greatly benefit from addressing domestic shortcomings in the field of minority rights. As of today, indeed, the Muslim community of Western Thrace is the only officially recognised minority in the country, a condition set by Türkiye in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. This situation respectively exemplifies what Philips condemns as a *double-standard approach* – which favours only those communities which enjoy the support of a powerful kin-state – alongside a *cherry-pick approach* towards international law which goes against the spirit of the Recommendations.¹⁰⁵ Hence, it is crucial to strengthen and broaden the Greek legal

⁹⁹ Committee of Ministers. *Resolution on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by Albania* (accessed: 26 November 2025); ACFC. *Fifth Opinion on Albania*, para. 15.

¹⁰⁰ European Committee of Petitions. *Petition No 1356/2024*, 7. (accessed: 26 November 2025).

¹⁰¹ Nedos, Vassilis. 2025. *Albania amends Greek identity legislation*. *Ekathimerini*, 27 January 2025.

¹⁰² Sabanadze, *The Bolzano Recommendations*, 307–317.

¹⁰³ Giakoumis, Kostantinos. 2019. The policy of non-discrimination and the protection of minority cultural heritage in Albania. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 26(1), 1–20.

¹⁰⁴ ACFC. *Fifth Opinion on Albania*, para 189 & 207.

¹⁰⁵ Phillips, Antony. 2011. *The rights of minorities and their interstate dimension: Interrelationship between the HCNM recommendations and the Framework Convention*, in *National minorities in Inter-state relations*, edited by Palermo, Francesco, and Natalie Sabanadze. Leiden & Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 111–127.

framework on minority rights, especially given that the Albanian community – the country’s largest ethnic minority – faces restricted voting rights, numerous legal constraints, and a long history of discrimination.¹⁰⁶

The three ECtHR rulings against Athens for violations of the *right of association*, due to the inadequacy of its legal framework, make urgent action in this area imperative. These are echoed by long-standing critiques of both domestic and international institutions, which have long criticised Athens’ assimilatory policies. Among them is the EU Fundamental Rights Experts Network and the Greek National Human Rights Commission, which called upon national authorities to undertake "sincere and constructive dialogue with groups seeking recognition as minorities, in accordance with international conventions for the protection of human rights and minorities".¹⁰⁷ Against this backdrop, ratifying the Framework, Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, as urged by the CoE Human Rights Commissioner as early as 2008, would be a powerful display of commitment, one capable of greatly enhancing Athens’ credibility as a kin-state.¹⁰⁸

Prioritising Everyday-Impact Issues: Property Rights

As of 2024, over 60% of Greek citizens believe there are more pressing issues affecting bilateral relations with Albania than the Beleri case.¹⁰⁹ Among these, the inadequate protection of property rights arguably stands out as the most relevant to the Greek minority, as extensively detailed by the ACFC in its opinions. In this context, Albania’s shortcomings in administrative and institutional capacity – especially in the field of property restitution – alongside widespread corruption, have often harboured practices detrimental to minority rights. Indeed, property-related challenges have disproportionately impacted areas traditionally inhabited by the Greek community – many of which are among the most lucrative tourist destinations along the Albanian coastline – leading to minority representatives denouncing “ethnic hostility”.¹¹⁰ The ACFC reacted with ‘deep concern’, urging authorities to “effectively protect the rights of persons belonging to the Greek national minority to preserve and develop their culture in areas of their traditional settlement” and to provide “effective protection against urban development practices that undermine their ability to continue residing in these areas”.¹¹¹ To this end, it called on Albanian authorities to expedite the implementation of property-related by-laws and address concerns of ethnic discrimination.¹¹²

To date, however, tangible progress is still missing. The Greek minority association *Himariotes’ Union* raised the issue once again in front of the EU Committee on Petitions, denouncing widespread violations of the right to reclaim religious and private property, as well as the practical impossibility of seeking legal action due to the severe inefficiency of the

¹⁰⁶ Speed, Madeleine, and Arlis Alikaj. 2020. *Rights Denied: Albanians in Greece Face Long-Term Limbo*. *Balkan Insight*, 1 July 2020.

¹⁰⁷ European Agency for Fundamental Rights. *Human rights of minorities in Greece* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

¹⁰⁸ Greece has signed but not ratified the Convention in 1997. See: Commissioner for Human Rights. See: Commissioner for Human Rights. *Report by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe: Following his visit to Greece on 8-10 December 2008* (accessed: 2 December 2025); Interdisciplinary Research Cell in Human Rights. *Thematic comments on the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in the EU member states* (accessed: 2 December 2025).

¹⁰⁹ Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. *Results of the opinion survey on Greek-Albanian relations* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

¹¹⁰ ACFC, *Fifth Opinion on Albania*, paragraph 87.

¹¹¹ ACFC, *Fifth Opinion on Albania*, paragraph 86.

¹¹² ACFC, *Fifth Opinion on Albania*, paragraph 112.

judiciary.¹¹³ In response, Brussels addressed Albanian authorities with a comprehensive set of recommendations to tackle property issues, urging Tirana “to deliver improvements in impartiality, independence, accountability, professionalism, quality and efficiency of the judicial system; and ensure significant further progress in tackling and preventing corruption”.¹¹⁴ Arguably, alongside the essential steps and reforms recently presented by the EU, recalibrating the scope of existing instruments – such as the IPA Albania “EU for Property Rights” programme – to enhance administrative capacity and strengthen public administration’s resilience to corruption could also have a significant impact.¹¹⁵ To this end, current TAIEX and Twinning projects could also be more effectively targeted, prioritising areas like Himara, where administrative expertise and the implementation of best practices are most needed.

Enhancing Bilateral Cooperation

Recognising political will and bipartisan commitment as the central variables in advancing minority rights in both Greece and Albania, the ACFC in 2023 underscored the urgent need for joint and coordinated efforts to address property disputes and other pressing issues.¹¹⁶ To this end, drafting a new treaty with an exclusive focus on minority rights could have positive repercussions, especially considering that the existing 1998 Treaty on Friendship and Good Neighbourliness (FCA) – which, however, has expired in 2021 and has not been renewed – lacks any specific provision in this regard.¹¹⁷ The 2003 Serb-Hungarian treaty could serve as a valuable model in this regard, as it includes specific clauses regulating property rights and the “economic participation of minorities”¹¹⁸, matters of paramount importance for the Greek minority.

To ensure effective implementation of bilateral agreements, the Recommendations encourage the establishment of joint monitoring commissions (JC) equipped with consultative powers. JCs are essential for mitigating tensions and “moderating [the] potential disruptive kin-state activism”¹¹⁹ as they provide platforms for sharing “information and concerns, pursue interests and ideas, and further support minorities on the basis of friendly relations”.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, to truly fulfil their potential as a moderating force, JCs must be equipped with adequate funding, operate within a clearly delineated legal framework grounded in international law and representative of all relevant stakeholders.¹²¹ In this case, the Albanian and Greek governments, representatives of the Greek community in Albania (the inclusion of the unrecognised Albanian minority in Greece is highly recommended), and CSOs. Bearing in mind the harmful role of nationalist education, the much-anticipated signing of a new FCA is expected to reinvigorate the work of the JC envisioned by the 1994 treaty on reorganising national curricula – a process that, so far, has largely fallen victim to political fluctuations and delivered few tangible results.¹²²

¹¹³ European Committee of Petitions, *Petition No 1356/2024*.

¹¹⁴ European Committee of Petitions, *Petition No 1356/2024*, 4.

¹¹⁵ European Commission. *Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II) 2014-2020* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

¹¹⁶ ACFC, *Fifth Opinion on Albania*, paragraphs 207-209.

¹¹⁷ UN Treaty Series. *Agreement between the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of Albania on friendship, cooperation, good neighbourliness, and security* (accessed: 2. December 2025).

¹¹⁸ International Labour Organization. *Agreement between the Republic of Hungary and Serbia and Montenegro on the protection of the rights of the Serbian national minority living in the Republic of Hungary and of the Hungarian national minority living in Serbia and Montenegro* (accessed: 2. December 2025).

¹¹⁹ Windischer, Roberta, and Emma Lantschner. 2001. Protection of national minorities through bilateral agreements in Southeastern Europe, *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 1(1), 535–561.

¹²⁰ High Commissioner on National Minorities, *Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations*, 26.

¹²¹ Udrea, Constantin, and Djordjević, *Kin-state engagement and its impact*.

¹²² Peshkopia and Giakoumis, *Nationalistic education*.

The Bolzano Recommendations emphasise “the involvement of independent third parties or multilateral mediation and arbitration mechanisms” as essential for “finding peaceful and viable solutions”¹²³ in times of bilateral crisis. To this end, non-partisan expert bodies such as the ACFC, the UN High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Venice Commission can provide relevant guidance and expertise when requested, to ensure that bilateral mechanisms like JCs complement – rather than replace – multilateral instruments. Essentially, just as Vasilev argues that only a cosmopolitan form of kin-state activism can be legitimate and, therefore, transformative, the Bolzano Recommendations similarly convey that reform, and change must occur within a broader transnational network of state and non-state actors – including CSOs and international organisations – to be effective and sustainable. In the case of vertical disputes, it goes without saying that the EU – *the* multilateral driver *par excellence* – is uniquely positioned to complement and coordinate intergovernmental efforts, while championing a forward-looking, cosmopolitan model of kin-state activism capable of minimising securitisation risks. As previously discussed, however, Brussels’ ability to unlock its full potential ultimately hinges on its willingness to uphold the integrity of the enlargement process, for – as Nancheva observes – only a renewed confidence in the European project can enable the de-securitisation of minority-majority relations.¹²⁴

For a Credible Enlargement: Addressing Vertical Disputes

As underscored by the Bolzano Recommendations, the principle of equality between parties is essential for an effective and sustainable resolution of kin/home states disputes. While some degree of asymmetry may be unavoidable in EU accession negotiations, the absence of adequate checks and balances regarding veto rights has significantly aggravated the problem, allowing member states to ‘free ride’ on the benefits of conditionality.¹²⁵ The consequences of this dynamic extend far beyond minority-rights disputes and hinders enlargement as a whole. Meaningful progress in this regard requires decoupling bilateral grievances from enlargement while simultaneously reinforcing the process’s merit-based and credible character. To this end, three recommendations are proposed: the adoption of the *Slovenian-German non paper*, that of the *Staged Accession Model*, and the establishment of an *alternative dispute resolutions mechanism*.

Moving towards QMV: The Slovenian-German non-paper

A shift to qualified majority voting (QMV) in EU decision-making would constitute a significant breakthrough, not only for enlargement but across all policy areas. In the wake of current geopolitical imperatives, the issue has once again gained considerable momentum. Yet, discussions in this sense have repeatedly met with scepticism from several member states, who fear that dropping unanimity could sideline their role in shaping EU agendas. While such concerns are legitimate and understandable, it is also true that the unanimity requirement has repeatedly backfired, resulting in the stagnation and the ‘capturing’ of enlargement. Notably, in their current form, accession negotiations provide 49 opportunities – 1,323 in total – for member states to halt the process, most of which arise during the intermediate stages of negotiations (*opening/closing of negotiation clusters, setting/assessing interim and closing benchmarks*).¹²⁶ This, however, stands at odds with

¹²³ High Commissioner on National Minorities, *Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations*, 26.

¹²⁴ Nancheva, *Securitisation reversed*, 34.

¹²⁵ Hillion, Christophe. 2024. Another “Big Bang” enlargement of the EU?. *Common Market Law Review* 61(1), 1–14, 3.

¹²⁶ Subotić, Strahinja, and Filipa Cvetanova. 2025. *Reining in the enlargement vetoes: The German-Slovenian non-paper under review*. *European Policy Centre*, June 2025.

Article 49, which requires unanimity only for the opening and conclusion of accession negotiations, without making any reference to the numerous intermediate phases. In short, considerable room for manoeuvre exists to streamline the accession process without confronting the Gordian knot of treaty revision. Against this backdrop, in January 2024 Germany and Slovenia presented a ‘non-paper’ to the EU Council proposing a transition to QMV (requiring at least 55% of the Council’s members and representing at least 65% of the Union’s population) for certain intermediate stages of accession negotiations like *the assessment of the fulfilment of opening accession benchmarks* (OBAR) and *the opening of accession clusters*.¹²⁷

According to the European Policy Centre (CEP), the non-paper’s adoption could neutralise up to 25% of veto opportunities, offering a modest yet tangible step toward enhancing the predictability of the overall process, whereas its impact on accession talks, however, would vary for each candidate state, depending on the current stage of negotiations.¹²⁸ While extending QMV to the closing of negotiating chapters would be highly desirable, even the partial transition advocated by the proposal would curb the risk of an arbitrary or disproportionate use of vetoes by individual member states, particularly on issues unrelated to the Copenhagen Criteria. Most importantly, adopting the ‘non-paper’ would significantly ‘empower the Council’, forcing gatekeeping member states to justify their objections to their peers rather than acting unilaterally, prioritising collegiality and coalition-building in the assessment of accession benchmarks. As a result, even when veto powers are exercised, they would reflect a coordinated, multilateral, ‘European’ strategy rather than a unilateral move, preventing the weaponisation of accession conditionality and its associated backlashes. As Clingendael emphasised, the proposal “*may not be a silver bullet for all the challenges that enlargement faces, but it could contribute to a restoration of the predictability [...], the credibility of the accession [...], and ultimately, the EU’s ambition to be a geopolitical actor.*”¹²⁹

The Staged-Accession Model: a Revolutionary, yet feasible, Path Forward

While a partial transition to QMV would improve the effectiveness of the current framework, a holistic remedy to the issue of vertical disputes requires a more audacious rethinking of the accession process. To this end, CEP has proposed its Staged Accession Model (SAM) – an innovative proposal, which would further amplify the benefits of a potential adoption of the ‘non-paper’ and, importantly, doesn’t meet any treaty-based obstacles for its implementation.¹³⁰ The SAM structures enlargement into four progressive stages with the third being ‘membership with temporary limitations’ (such as the use of veto powers in the Council) and the final one being ‘full-fledged membership’. Each stage provides gradual integration into EU agencies and institutions even before membership, as well as increased financial assistance, creating strong incentives for reforms and alignment with EU standards. At the same time, it incorporates strict reversibility mechanisms safeguarding the merit and merit-based nature of enlargement.¹³¹

¹²⁷ N/A. Non-paper on a more efficient Enlargement Process – suggestions for technical amendments to the Enlargement Methodology. *Obtained by the author through an undisclosed source.*

¹²⁸ Subotić and Cvetanova, *Reining the enlargement vetoes.*

¹²⁹ Zveers, Wouters. 2024. Unblocking decision-making in EU enlargement: Qualified majority voting as a way forward?. *Clingendael Institute*, June 2024. Italics by author.

¹³⁰ Mihajlović, Milena 2023. Template 2.0 for staged accession to the EU. *European Policy Centre, European Policy Centre*, 28 August 2023.

¹³¹ Subotić, Strahinja. 2023. Enabling gradual access to EU institutions with the staged accession model. *European Policy Centre*, July 2023.

When it comes to the resolution of vertical disputes, the staged accession model is beneficial in at least two significant ways. From the perspective of *acceding countries*, stronger incentive structures, incorporating increased financial and institutional incentives, would serve as a powerful catalyst for constructive settlement, preventing prolonged entanglement in bilateral disputes. Likewise, from the perspective of EU gatekeepers, the 'temporary limitations' foreseen in Stage 3, like the *suspension of veto powers* in the Council (which would also reduce the risk of further unilateral blockades) and the *revitalisation of post-accession monitoring*, would allow for a strengthening of safeguard clauses, enabling the dropping of conditionality-based leverage as the main tool for dispute settlement. Most notably, the shift from a 'vertical' to a 'horizontal' understanding of enlargement would mitigate the asymmetry between member and candidate countries, granting the latter a "sense of belonging even before official membership".¹³² For example, integration within the Council, albeit free of deliberative powers, "would enable candidates to engage in discussions with member states' officials on mainstream EU policy issues and socialise with their EU peers"¹³³, while at the same time upholding the predictability and meritocracy of the accession process. Similar innovations would multiply dialogue opportunities between gatekeeping and obstructed countries, fostering a moderating and trust-building atmosphere where the settlement of contentious issues is more likely to occur, allowing rational, European solutions to prevail over narrow political interests.

Decoupling vertical disputes

While the EU has traditionally assumed a proactive role in mediating horizontal disputes – for example, within the Belgrade-Pristina facilitated dialogue or through the Berlin Process platform – its capacity to intervene in vertical disputes involving member states remains limited. This largely stems from the asymmetry of power underpinning accession talks, further entrenched by the unanimity requirement. Transitioning to QMV in the opening of negotiating chapters, however, would prevent gatekeeping member states from systematically resorting to veto powers, compelling them to engage constructively at the negotiating table when 'outvoted' by other Council members. However, the non-paper is not without drawbacks, whereas bilateral grievances risk being swept under the carpet at the opening of negotiating chapters only to resurface at the closing phase. To mitigate this, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) has recommended complementing the non-paper with "the introduction of a QMV threshold that distinguishes between legitimate concerns – those that should be addressed within the accession process as part of the criteria – and illegitimate issues that fall outside its scope".¹³⁴ This would mark a much-needed departure from the current 'moving target' approach to accession benchmarks, curbing the ability of individual member states to unilaterally derail accession talks over political grievances, while also preventing such grievances from being misrepresented as violations of accession criteria. Ultimately, it would enable a 'consensual divorce' between bilateral disputes and EU enlargement, strengthening the integrity of the accession process.

Non-Copenhagen disputes (encompassing, for example, border disputes and issues of history, language, and identity) would be addressed outside the enlargement context, with both parties standing on an equal footing. However, the EU would maintain structured and

¹³² Subotić, *Enabling gradual access*.

¹³³ Subotić, Strahinja. 2024. From bystanders to contributors: A realistic way towards candidates' participation in the EU Council. *European Policy Centre*, September 2024.

¹³⁴ Marić, Josip. 2024. Bilateral disputes and EU enlargement: A consensual divorce?. *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, 2 May 2024.

proactive dialogue with both parties, providing expertise, support, and mediation through existing mechanisms such as the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, by engaging with OSCE and CoE bodies like the ACFC, or international legal dispute resolution tools. Crucially, as CEP emphasises, the SAM adoption would allow both processes to unfold in a parallel, yet synergic and mutually reinforcing manner. A more credible enlargement promise, combined with revitalised incentive structures and expanded trust-building opportunities envisaged under the SAM, would unlock the full potential of Europeanisation in resolving bilateral grievances, ensuring broad social and political acceptance – especially if additional targeted financial incentives were provided to support this goal.¹³⁵

Copenhagen-related disputes would instead fall within the scope of accession negotiations. In the context of a SAM-based enlargement, however, multiplied trust-building opportunities through institutional integration would significantly lessen the degree of asymmetry, fostering a moderating climate conducive for sustainable settlements. Likewise, new incentive structures and the decoupling of unrelated issues suggested by BCSP would prevent unilateral political interferences and restore enlargement to its merit-based nature. Credibility and predictability would then act as powerful reform drivers, supporting and rewarding those candidates showing credible commitment. Conversely, in cases of backsliding or prolonged stagnation, reversibility mechanisms would apply, stripping candidates of benefits or advancements.

The combined effect of deeper institutional integration, robust financial incentives, and revitalised post-accession monitoring under SAM with a QMV-based distinction of ‘bilateral’ and ‘European’ issues would be a significant breakthrough in the context of *kin/home state disputes*. Specifically, it would: (1) prevent individual kin-states from monopolising and weaponising EU veto powers, enabling a collegial and merit-based use of conditionality; (2) disentangle political and nationalist outbidding from minority rights concerns, ensuring each is addressed on its own terms. This, in turn, could empower the ‘cosmopolitan’ kin-state activism highlighted in this paper. Indeed, with a robust system of checks and balances in place, and solid safeguards against nationalist outbidding, the EU could take the lead, embedding bilateral initiatives within broader transnational networks – empowering minority communities and CoE bodies such as the ACFC – and allowing shared solutions, grounded in European common values, to take precedence over narrow political interests.

Conclusions

Returning to the original research puzzle: addressing the interplay between kin-state activism and the securitisation of national minorities in the framework of EU enlargement, this paper emphasised how the nationalisation of the enlargement process and the securitisation of national minorities in both candidate and member states are two sides of the same coin. Recent Greek and Hungarian vetoes suggest that, rather than fostering dialogue and moderation, the current EU framework enables member states to instrumentalise kin minorities abroad to ‘punch above their weight’ in bilateral disputes, effectively imposing partisan agendas over broader European interests. The Beleri case, characterised by intense bipartisan politicisation, exemplifies how the interference of kin-state politics and nationalist outbidding with EU enlargement produces a concerning pattern of reciprocity – a ‘boomerang effect’ that reinforces what Nancheva terms “pre-European

¹³⁵ Čerimagić, Adnan, and Simon Blockmans. 2023. *EU enlargement and the resolution of bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans*. *Centre for European Policy Studies*, 10 July 2023.

institutions and identities”¹³⁶, and facilitates the securitisation of national minorities both in the ‘obstructed’ home state and in the gatekeeping kin-state. Central to this dynamic is the absence of clear provisions qualifying ‘bilateral disputes’ and regulating the use of unilateral veto powers. This gap not only enables the suspension of negotiations over issues that fall outside the Copenhagen criteria but also allows political grievances to hijack the very assessment of accession benchmarks. This strikes at the very core of the EU’s credibility and frustrates its *raison d’être*: prioritising common interests and collective commitments over national grievances. Action in this direction is compelling, especially at a time of unprecedented geopolitical challenges, when the Union is most expected to deliver on its long-standing enlargement commitments in the face of an unprecedented pool of ten candidate countries. At a critical crossroads, it becomes clear that enlargement cannot rely on geopolitics alone, whereas, without a paradigm shift, both ‘old’ Western Balkan and ‘new’ Eastern Trio candidates risk remaining indefinitely trapped in vertical disputes.

As detailed, many are the solutions at reach for the EU to ‘speak with one voice’. The QMV-based distinction of ‘bilateral’ and ‘European’ issues, alongside the SAM, is a key step in weakening the discretionary power of single member states and empowering the Council and fostering a much-needed positive spillover effect. This would be particularly beneficial in the sphere of kin/home state disputes where, as the ‘Beleri Case’ suggests, asymmetrically enforced settlements may not be sustainable in the long term. At the same time, complementing bilateral efforts with a humanitarian-driven, ‘cosmopolitan’ form of kin-state activism – rather than a ‘narcissistic’ one – would serve the best interests of minority communities on both sides of the divide, halting the vicious circle of securitisation. This is especially crucial given that questions of minority rights and kin-state activism are increasingly shaping not only Ukraine’s accession path but also that of Montenegro and other candidate countries. Awareness of these dynamics is well established within EU institutions themselves, as reflected in the repeated calls from the Commission for member states to “abstain from misusing outstanding issues in the EU accession process”, which, however, have often fallen on deaf ears.¹³⁷ All while escalating security threats and deepening democratic backsliding, have made increasingly clear that the future of the EU as a global actor is indissolubly tied to its ability to reconcile divergent internal positions and uphold its foundational values. First and foremost, the empowerment of human and minority rights.

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¹³⁶ Nancheva, *Securitisation reversed*, 34.

¹³⁷ European Commission. *Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans* (accessed: 26 November 2025).

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