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Surveying Public Perceptions of EU Membership Among Albanians in Albania, North  
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# Abstract

This thesis investigates public perceptions of European Union (EU) membership among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, aiming to elucidate the multifaceted factors that shape their attitudes toward EU integration. Despite prevailing pro-European sentiments, public opinion in these countries is nuanced and influenced by a confluence of economic expectations, concerns over national sovereignty, levels of political trust, and aspects of cultural identity.

Employing a quantitative research design, an extensive online survey was administered to over 500 Albanian respondents across the three countries. The survey was meticulously crafted to assess determinants such as economic self-interest, political ideology, knowledge and awareness of EU policies, and relevant demographic variables.

The findings reveal that economic expectations are the most significant predictor of support for EU membership. Individuals who anticipate economic benefits from integration are more likely to support membership, highlighting the importance of addressing economic concerns in the integration process. Political trust, particularly in EU institutions, also plays a critical role. Higher trust in EU institutions correlates with greater support for EU membership, suggesting that perceptions of institutional efficacy and integrity are crucial.

Cultural concerns and the preservation of national identity have a significant yet less pronounced impact on support for EU membership. While many respondents believe that national identity can coexist with EU membership, a notable minority express apprehensions about cultural erosion. Knowledge levels about the EU significantly impact support for membership, emphasizing the need for enhanced public education and information dissemination.

The study concludes that policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize strategies that address economic expectations, enhance political trust, respect cultural identities, and improve public knowledge to foster a supportive environment for EU integration. By understanding and addressing the factors that influence public support, the successful integration of these countries into the EU becomes more attainable.

# Zusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die öffentliche Wahrnehmung der Mitgliedschaft in der Europäischen Union (EU) unter Albanern in Albanien, Nordmazedonien und Kosovo, mit dem Ziel, die vielfältigen Faktoren zu beleuchten, die ihre Einstellungen zur EU-Integration prägen. Trotz vorherrschender pro-europäischer Stimmung ist die öffentliche Meinung in diesen Ländern nuanciert und wird von einer Mischung aus wirtschaftlichen Erwartungen, Bedenken hinsichtlich nationaler Souveränität, politischem Vertrauen und Aspekten kultureller Identität beeinflusst.

Unter Anwendung eines quantitativen Forschungsdesigns wurde eine umfangreiche Online-Umfrage mit über 500 albanischen Teilnehmern in den drei Ländern durchgeführt. Die Umfrage wurde sorgfältig konzipiert, um Determinanten wie wirtschaftliches Eigeninteresse, politische Ideologie, Wissen und Bewusstsein über EU-Politiken sowie relevante demografische Variablen zu erfassen.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass wirtschaftliche Erwartungen der bedeutendste Prädiktor für die Unterstützung der EU-Mitgliedschaft sind. Personen, die wirtschaftliche Vorteile durch die Integration erwarten, neigen eher dazu, die Mitgliedschaft zu unterstützen, was die Bedeutung der Berücksichtigung wirtschaftlicher Anliegen im Integrationsprozess hervorhebt. Politisches Vertrauen, insbesondere in EU-Institutionen, spielt ebenfalls eine entscheidende Rolle. Höheres Vertrauen in EU-Institutionen korreliert mit größerer Unterstützung der EU-Mitgliedschaft, was auf die Bedeutung von institutioneller Effizienz und Integrität hinweist.

Kulturelle Bedenken und die Bewahrung der nationalen Identität haben einen signifikanten, wenn auch weniger ausgeprägten Einfluss auf die Unterstützung der EU-Mitgliedschaft. Während viele Befragte glauben, dass nationale Identität mit der EU-Mitgliedschaft koexistieren kann, äußert eine bemerkenswerte Minderheit Bedenken hinsichtlich eines möglichen kulturellen Verlusts. Kenntnisstände über die EU beeinflussen die Unterstützung der Mitgliedschaft erheblich und unterstreichen die Notwendigkeit verbesserter öffentlicher Bildung und Informationsverbreitung.

Die Studie kommt zu dem Schluss, dass politische Entscheidungsträger und Interessengruppen Strategien priorisieren sollten, die wirtschaftliche Erwartungen adressieren, politisches Vertrauen stärken, kulturelle Identitäten respektieren und das öffentliche Wissen verbessern, um ein unterstützendes Umfeld für die EU-Integration zu fördern. Durch das Verständnis und die Berücksichtigung der Faktoren, die die öffentliche Unterstützung beeinflussen, wird die erfolgreiche Integration dieser Länder in die EU erreichbar.

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# List of abbreviations

|              |                                                             |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| AA           | Alliance for Albanians                                      |
| Albania/PS   | Socialist Party (Albania)                                   |
| Albania/PD   | Democratic Party (Albania)                                  |
| BESA         | Besa Movement (North Macedonia)                             |
| BDI (DUI)    | Democratic Union for Integration (North Macedonia)          |
| CULT (CULTi) | Cultural and Identity Concerns (variable in regression)     |
| CSOs         | Civil Society Organizations                                 |
| ECB          | European Central Bank                                       |
| EC           | European Commission                                         |
| ECON         | Economic Expectations                                       |
| EEAS         | European External Action Service                            |
| EIP          | Economic and Investment Plan                                |
| EMU          | Economic and Monetary Union                                 |
| ERA          | European Reform Agenda                                      |
| ERM II       | Exchange Rate Mechanism II                                  |
| EU           | European Union                                              |
| EACEA        | Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency<br>(EU) |
| FDI          | Foreign Direct Investment                                   |
| FES          | Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung                                    |
| GDP          | Gross Domestic Product                                      |
| H1           | Hypothesis 1                                                |
| H2           | Hypothesis 2                                                |
| H3           | Hypothesis 3                                                |
| H4           | Hypothesis 4                                                |
| IMF          | International Monetary Fund                                 |

|                             |                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| IPA                         | Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance                                                            |
| IPA III                     | Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance III                                                        |
| KNOW                        | Knowledge and Awareness (variable in regression)                                                   |
| LDK                         | Democratic League of Kosovo                                                                        |
| MCAR                        | Missing Completely at Random                                                                       |
| MLE                         | Maximum Likelihood Estimation                                                                      |
| NGOs                        | Non-Governmental Organizations                                                                     |
| OECD                        | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development                                             |
| PDK                         | Democratic Party of Kosovo                                                                         |
| PolTrust                    | Political Trust (variable in regression)                                                           |
| QR code                     | Quick Response code                                                                                |
| REA                         | Regional Economic Area                                                                             |
| R <sup>2</sup> (McFadden's) | Pseudo R-squared measure for logistic regression                                                   |
| SAA                         | Stabilisation and Association Agreement                                                            |
| SDSM                        | Social Democratic Union of Macedonia                                                               |
| SEE                         | Southeast Europe                                                                                   |
| SMEs                        | Small and Medium-sized Enterprises                                                                 |
| SPAK                        | Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure                                              |
| Union I.T.                  | International Telecommunication Union                                                              |
| VIF                         | Variance Inflation Factor                                                                          |
| VIFs                        | Variance Inflation Factors                                                                         |
| VMRO-DPMNE                  | Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization –<br>Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity |
| Vetëvendosje                | Self-Determination Movement (Kosovo)                                                               |
| WB                          | Western Balkans                                                                                    |
| WB6                         | Western Balkans Six                                                                                |

|            |                                                                     |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| WBIF       | Western Balkans Investment Framework                                |
| World Bank | International financial institution (economic/development analysis) |

# 1.Introduction

With strong goals for political stability, economic expansion, and integration into the larger European framework, Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo have all made significant advancements toward EU membership. Public support for EU membership remains strong across these nations, even though they are at different stages in the integration process. This support is largely driven by the promise of improved governance standards and enhanced economic prospects. However, various interrelated factors, such as economic expectations, concerns over national sovereignty, and the significant influence of the Albanian population in these regions, shape and nuance this enthusiasm. Understanding public attitudes toward EU membership in these countries is crucial, as it directly impacts the success of the integration process and the implementation of necessary reforms.

It is expected that these Western Balkan nations' accession to the EU will have a revolutionary impact, promoting political stability, economic growth, and regional collaboration. Given that a significant percentage of the population in Albania, Kosovo, and portions of North Macedonia are Albanian, the "Albanian factor" is especially important in this context and has a big impact on public opinion in these countries. Albanians are positioned as important players in the region's journey towards EU membership, and this impact is further strengthened by historical, cultural, and economic ties (Commission, European, 2021a).

Although North Macedonia and Albania have been candidates for the EU since 2005 and 2014, respectively, Kosovo is still a potential candidate pending further development in its integration initiatives. However, all three countries view EU membership as essential for advancing economic reforms, improving governance, and ensuring long-term peace in the region (Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs. (n.d.), (n.d.)).

Despite particular concerns regarding national identity, economic sovereignty, and the impacts of EU policies, public opinion in all three countries generally aligns with support for the EU's objectives. (Service, European External Action, 2021).

## 1.1 Introduction to the Problem

Engaging the European Union in the Western Balkans, and particularly in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, may present one very unique opportunity in the variations of public opinion creation and various stages of EU integration processes.

In Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, where Albanian populations exert substantial political and cultural influence, the "Albanian factor" plays a critical role in shaping public attitudes toward EU membership. This study aims to explore how these populations perceive EU accession, with a focus on identifying the key drivers behind support for or opposition to the integration process.

Particularly, economic integration appears to be a central motivator for EU membership, shaping public opinion across these candidate nations. The influence of the Albanian community is particularly significant as it transcends national borders, given the shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties between these countries an element that sets them apart from other non-EU Balkan republics (Commission, European, 2022c).

The prospect of enhanced economic stability and growth significantly drives public support for EU integration in these countries. Economic advantages such as increased foreign investment, infrastructure development, and modernization dominate the public discourse, underscoring the potential transformative impact of EU membership (Bartlett W. , 2019). However, as seen in other nations on the path to EU accession, apprehensions regarding the possible erosion of cultural identity and the loss of national sovereignty remain prominent (Freyburg, 2010; Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005). These concerns are particularly pronounced in Kosovo and North Macedonia, where the political dynamics of the Albanian population exert substantial influence (Commission, European, 2020a; Anthony Arnall & Damian Chalmers , 2023).

Public attitudes toward EU membership are strongly influenced by rising economic expectations, as membership is perceived as a pathway to modernization, increased foreign investment, and enhanced governance (Toshkov D. K., 2014; European Union Publications Office, 2023). The European Commission has emphasized the role of financial and technical assistance in advancing the economic development of these countries, a factor that has reinforced the generally positive outlook on EU integration (Commission, European, 2020; Commission, European, 2021a). Despite these optimistic views, there are ongoing concerns regarding the economic challenges of integration, particularly the ability of these countries to compete with established EU member states (Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs. (n.d.), (n.d.)).

This thesis seeks to examine the interplay between economic expectations, political ideology, and knowledge of EU policies in shaping public attitudes toward EU membership. Building on Blinder and Krueger's (2004) model of public opinion formation, the research will analyze how factors such as self-interest, economic motivations, ideology, knowledge, and

demographic variables like education and age affect varying levels of support for EU membership across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide insights into the key determinants of public opinion in these candidate countries and offer policy recommendations for addressing public concerns throughout the EU accession process.

## 1.2 Research Question and Hypotheses

The aspiration for European Union (EU) membership has driven significant political and economic reforms across the Western Balkans, particularly in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. These countries, where Albanians constitute a substantial ethnic presence across borders, exhibit strong pro-European sentiments, viewing EU membership as a pathway to political stability, economic growth, and integration within EU frameworks (Anthony Arnall & Damian Chalmers, 2023). Nonetheless, the factors influencing public support or opposition to EU accession are complex, encompassing economic expectations, political trust, cultural identity, and concerns over national sovereignty (European Union Publications Office, 2023). A clear understanding of these influences is crucial for policymakers in both the EU and candidate countries to navigate the accession process effectively (European Union Publications Office, 2023).

Historically, the European project garnered strong support based on the optimism of EU citizens; however, this enthusiasm waned, particularly after the Maastricht Treaty, as deeper integration introduced new challenges and shifts in EU authority (Koop, 2021; EUR-Lex, 1992; Citrin J. &, 2018). Events such as the 2015 refugee crisis further impacted public trust, leading to significant declines in support, although the EU has since worked to rebuild this confidence, gradually regaining public favor (Commission, European, 2021a). Research suggests that while economic benefits and political stability are powerful motivations for supporting EU membership, issues related to cultural identity and national sovereignty frequently generate skepticism (Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005; Borgonovi, 2017). In this context, public opinion on EU membership is also influenced by perceptions of the effectiveness of national governments (Koop, 2021).

The study addresses the following research questions to examine the determinants shaping public opinion on EU membership among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo:

1. *How do economic expectations and political trust influence public support for EU membership among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo?*
2. *What is the role of cultural identity and national sovereignty in shaping attitudes towards EU membership among Albanians in these three countries?*

These questions seek to uncover the underlying factors driving support for or opposition to EU integration, with a particular focus on the distinctive role of Albanian communities in the Western Balkans. The analysis will offer insights into how economic aspirations, political trust, and cultural identity intersect to shape public opinion on EU membership within these countries.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** *Higher economic expectations related to EU membership are positively correlated with public support for joining the EU.*

Economic prospects play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion. Given the prospect of economic growth, improved infrastructure, job creation, and access to the single market, citizens who anticipate personal and national economic benefits are probably more in favor of EU membership (Toshkov D. K., 2014; Commission, European, 2020c). The EU is often seen as an entryway to prosperity and modernization in nations where economic issues like unemployment, poverty, and a lack of investment are common (Bank., 2021a).

However, there are also concerns about potential downsides of EU membership, including increased competition from established EU industries, which could threaten local businesses and lead to job losses in certain sectors (Bank., 2021a). For example, the agricultural industry might face difficulties as a result of strict EU regulations and competition from more productive EU producers. This dichotomy of expectations calls for a sophisticated understanding of public economic perceptions.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** *Albanians who place a higher emphasis on national sovereignty are less supportive of EU membership.*

Cultural identity and national sovereignty issues can have a detrimental effect on opinions regarding EU membership. There may be less support from those who worry that EU membership will weaken cultural heritage, impose laws that go against national customs, or reduce national autonomy (Freyburg, 2010; Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005). This is particularly relevant in regions with a strong sense of national identity and historical experiences of external influence.

The recognition of statehood, ethnic identities, and language policies have all been hotly debated in Kosovo and North Macedonia (Freyburg, 2010; Commission, European, 2020a). The name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia and Kosovo's bid for international

recognition serve as a reminder of how sensitive matters pertaining to national sovereignty are (Koop, 2021). Depending on how EU membership affects these fundamental problems, it could be viewed as a threat or a solution.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** *Individuals with greater knowledge and awareness of EU policies are more likely to support EU membership.*

Awareness of EU policies and institutions plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion. Research shows that individuals with a comprehensive understanding of EU policies are more likely to support integration, as they recognize both the benefits and responsibilities that come with EU membership (Blinder, 2004). However, many candidate countries face challenges in providing reliable information, and media portrayals can influence public perceptions in varied ways. Misleading narratives or selective reporting may heighten skepticism, especially when emphasizing economic dependencies or threats to cultural identity (European Union Publications Office, 2023; Department, 2014). This hypothesis underscores the importance of transparent communication and accurate information dissemination to cultivate a well-informed public stance on EU membership.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4):** *Higher levels of political trust in national and EU institutions are associated with increased support for EU membership.*

Political trust is a key factor in public support for EU membership. When citizens perceive national and EU institutions as effective, transparent, and accountable, they are more inclined to view EU membership positively, believing in their government's capacity to manage the integration process successfully (Citrin J. &, 2018). Conversely, low trust in national governance may lead citizens to either see EU membership as a preferable governance model or, if they are also skeptical of the EU, to approach integration with caution (Borgonovi, 2017). This dynamic is especially relevant in the Western Balkans, where corruption and governance issues persist, prompting some to view EU standards as pathways toward improved governance. The EU's Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) has played a crucial role in supporting governance reforms, strengthening institutional accountability, and enhancing public trust (Commission, European, 2021a).

**Methodology for Testing Hypotheses:** To evaluate these hypotheses, an online survey targeting Albanian populations in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Albania will be conducted. This survey will gather quantitative data across demographic and socio-political dimensions, focusing on economic expectations, political trust, cultural identity, and EU policy awareness, which are essential for understanding attitudes toward EU membership.

The survey will include questions constructed around the following dimensions, each aligned with the research questions and hypotheses:

- **Economic Expectations:** Assessing respondents' opinions on the potential effects of EU membership on their own financial situation, job prospects, and the country's economy. Perceptions of potential advancements in healthcare, education, infrastructure, and general living standards are a few examples of possible questions.
- **Political Trust:** Evaluating trust in national governments, parliaments, judicial systems, and EU institutions. The survey will measure how these institutions are perceived in terms of responsiveness, efficacy, transparency, and corruption.
- **Cultural Identity and National Sovereignty:** Analyzing concerns about maintaining national border controls, language, and religious beliefs while maintaining autonomy within the EU. Questions will focus on concerns about heritage loss, cultural homogenization, and international interfering in domestic issues.
- **Knowledge and Awareness:** Evaluating the respondents' knowledge of EU institutions, policies, enlargement requirements, and the accession process. The survey will assess sources of information, such as media outlets, educational programs, government communications, or social networks.
- **Demographic Factors:** Collecting data on political affiliation, urban or rural residency, employment status, age, gender, and level of education in order to evaluate how these variables impact public opinion.

This data will undergo empirical analysis using ordinal probit regression models to identify significant predictors of EU support among the Albanian populations in the study areas.

Through this analysis, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how economic, cultural, and political factors shape public sentiment toward EU integration across the Western Balkans.

## 1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This master's thesis offers an in-depth examination of the factors influencing public opinion regarding EU membership in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. It is structured into five major chapters, each covering an important aspect of the research question. From the theoretical foundations of public opinion formation to the empirical analysis of survey data, the structure is designed to logically lead to the policy recommendations that arise from the findings.

## **1. Introduction:**

This introductory chapter establishes the context and significance of EU integration in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, with a particular emphasis on the influence of the Albanian factor. The chapter outlines the primary research question, highlights its relevance in the context of EU enlargement, and introduces the hypotheses to be tested. These include economic expectations, political trust, national sovereignty, political ideology, and knowledge about the EU.

## **2. Literature Review:**

This chapter aims to establish the theoretical framework by reviewing key studies, policy reports, and EU documents on factors shaping public support for EU integration, specifically for Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The literature emphasizes economic integration, highlighting how economic stability, development potential, and alignment with EU standards foster support for membership in these Western Balkan countries. According to the utilitarian view, economic self-interest heavily influences public opinion, with job creation, market access, and investment being central to forming attitudes toward the EU (Palmer M. J., 1995). Additionally, EU frameworks such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) and the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) significantly shape regional perceptions of economic opportunities and structural improvements (Commission, European, 2021a; Commission, European, 2020c). Political dynamics also play a critical role, as public opinion hinges on sovereignty, national identity preservation, and governance reform. Liberal, pro-European perspectives advocate for modernization and alignment with EU standards, viewing integration as a path toward democratic consolidation and economic growth (Šabić A. E., 2018). In contrast, conservative Euroscepticism expresses concerns over sovereignty and cultural identity, perceiving EU policies as potential threats to national interests (Marks L. H., 2001). Trust in domestic institutions and fears regarding EU overreach are important factors influencing enthusiasm for integration (Borgonovi, 2017).

Public awareness and accurate information are essential, as EU outreach, government channels, and media shape public perception. Accessible information fosters support for integration, while misinformation tends to increase Euroscepticism (Boomgaarden, 2006). Media framing and EU-related information influence citizens' attitudes, underscoring the need for effective communication strategies to enhance public understanding (Szicherle, 2017). Cultural and identity concerns are also significant,

with national identity playing a substantial role in shaping perceptions, particularly regarding cultural preservation. Social identity theory suggests that a strong national identity may lead to ambivalence or opposition to integration if cultural heritage is perceived as being under threat (Marks L. H., 2001). However, religion seems to play a minimal role, as economic stability and political security take precedence in discussions about EU integration. Shared aspirations for development and alignment with European values foster cross-religious support for the EU. This chapter synthesizes how economic incentives, political ideologies, public awareness, and cultural identity converge to shape public opinion on EU membership, providing context for the empirical analysis in the following chapters and highlighting the complexities of EU integration for Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

### 3. **Methodology:**

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological framework employed to analyze public attitudes toward EU membership. It describes the quantitative survey conducted among 505 respondents from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, focusing on the variables measured, such as economic expectations, political trust, cultural identity, and EU knowledge. The chapter explains the sampling strategy, which ensures representativeness across age, gender, and geographic regions, and details the design of the survey instrument, including Likert-scale questions and demographic indicators. The econometric approach is introduced, with a particular focus on the ordered logistic regression model, used to evaluate the relationships between independent variables and levels of support for EU membership. Robustness checks, including tests for multicollinearity, proportional odds assumptions, and model fit, are discussed to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis. The methodological rigor described in this chapter establishes a solid foundation for interpreting the findings and drawing evidence-based conclusions.

### 4. **Findings:**

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, structured into two main sections: descriptive statistics and econometric analysis.

The descriptive statistics offer an overview of the survey results, providing insights into demographic patterns, levels of support for EU membership, and regional differences across Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The econometric analysis delves into the key determinants of public opinion, testing hypotheses related to economic expectations, cultural identity concerns, political trust, and knowledge

levels. The findings reveal the significant role of economic self-interest in driving support for EU integration, as well as the moderating effects of cultural and identity-related apprehensions. Political trust, particularly in EU institutions, emerges as a critical factor, especially in contexts where domestic governance is perceived as weak. The chapter also performs a comparative analysis, highlighting regional nuances such as Kosovo's emphasis on economic development, North Macedonia's heightened cultural sensitivities, and Albania's focus on governance reforms. The results are interpreted within the broader theoretical framework, offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between economic, political, and cultural factors.

#### **5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:**

The final chapter synthesizes the key findings of the research, reaffirming the main determinants of public opinion on EU membership, including economic expectations, political trust, knowledge, and cultural identity concerns. It discusses the broader implications of the findings for EU policymakers and the governments of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Practical policy recommendations are provided, focusing on strategies to improve public communication about the benefits of EU membership, address cultural and sovereignty concerns, and enhance knowledge and awareness through education and media outreach. The chapter concludes by identifying potential areas for future research, such as longitudinal studies on evolving public opinion during the EU accession process and comparative analyses with other Western Balkan countries.

## **2. The European Economic and Political Integration of Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia**

For the past two decades, integration into the European Union has been at the top of the list of priorities for Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. A more general interpretation of this goal involves economic well-being, political stability, and social cohesion in the aftermath of turbulent events associated with violence, authoritarianism, and poverty (Commission, European, 2020a; Glenny, 2012). These Western Balkan countries have more recently confronted the challenges of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, ethnic conflicts, and, moreover, economic transition from central planning to market mechanisms (Bieber, Florian, 2018). Their potential accession into the EU is considered a means for them to secure a place in the European political and economic landscape. With the strategic importance of the

region, further complicated by ethnic compositions and historical legacies, the process of European integration has been both a priority and a challenge for these nations (Krasniqi, 2010; Pusc, 2014). The EU's policy of enlargement towards the Western Balkans is not just an attempt to expand the Union's borders but also an effort to bring stability, democracy, and economic development to this perennially unstable region (Glenny, 2012; European Union Publications Office, 2023).

What is peculiar in this integration process is the so-called "Albanian factor," a transnational link based on common cultural, historical, and linguistic ties among Albanian communities across borders. Albanians have been the majority population in Albania, the overwhelming population majority in Kosovo, and a significant minority in North Macedonia (Krasniqi, 2010; Elsie, 2010). Their cumulative longings and apprehensions are really decisive in shaping public opinion and policy directions toward EU integration. The Albanian identity, marked by strong ethnic cohesion and historical narratives of marginalization, introduces both solidarity and complexity into the accession process (Vangeli, 2011). It crosses over into issues of national sovereignty, ethnic relations, and regional dynamics all requiring a greater nuance of understanding regarding its impact on EU integration efforts (Bojičić-Dželilović, 2009; Pusc, 2014).

European integration in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia is not just a technical process of implementing EU laws and regulations; rather, it profoundly affects those nations' internal political, economic, and sociocultural environments. Pervasive corruption, a weak rule of law, political instability, and economic underdevelopment are still outstanding issues that have long hindered the successful accomplishment of EU membership criteria according to the Copenhagen criteria set by the European Council (1993) (Commission, European, 2021a; Council, 1993). Furthermore, the EU itself has suffered from enlargement fatigue and internal challenges, raising questions about how far and how fast further enlargements should proceed (Bieber, Florian, 2018; Schäfer, 2020). These dynamics emphasize the a factor of two challenges that each Western Balkan nation must overcome in order to integrate into the EU: internal reform and external uncertainty.

The understanding of such dynamics reinforces the necessity for an analysis based on theoretical perspectives about public attitudes toward European integration. This chapter therefore probes these perspectives within the theoretical framework that acts as a background to inform the research questions and methodology of this study (Marks L. H., 2001; McLaren, 2006). In particular, this section sets the stage for a deeper exploration of themes such as economic expectations, political trust, cultural identity, and media influence in subsequent

chapters. The investigation will be guided by the theoretical frameworks discussed here, including the model of Blinder & Krueger (Blinder, 2004), on how self-interest, ideology, knowledge, education, and demographic elements influence the public opinion of Albanians in three countries on EU membership.

This chapter also aligns with the specific focus of the study, which seeks to understand how differing stages of EU integration impact public perception among Albanian populations that are culturally and historically interconnected yet politically diverse. This nuanced analysis offers value to policymakers, scholars, and stakeholders involved in the EU enlargement process, as it elucidates the complex issues requiring consideration for successful integration (Marco R. Steenbergen, 2007; Trenz, 2019). The findings contribute insights into the unique dynamics at play within Albanian communities, helping inform policy approaches that respect cultural ties while advancing the goals of stability and unity central to the European project.

## 2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Public Attitudes Towards European Integration

Public opinion about European integration in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia is thought to be a result of various factors viewed through a synthesized lens of different theoretical frameworks. This study will synthesize a few core frameworks: those of political economy and rationality, domestic proxies, the interaction between mass publics and political elites, political psychology, and social identity theory (Marks L. H., 2001; Marks L. H., 2001). Each framework was chosen based on its relevance to examining Albanian public opinion on EU membership, particularly in regions where socio-political dynamics are influenced by distinct national and transnational factors.

The political economy and rationality perspective postulates that citizens judge the EU on utilitarian grounds by making calculations of costs and benefits (Trenz, 2019; Palmer M. J., 1995). From this perspective, citizens consider how EU membership might affect their individual economic condition e.g., egocentric considerations and the national economy as a whole sociotropic considerations (Palmer M. J., 1995). In this context, where there is greater potential for economic betterment, EU support tends to be higher. Many citizens of North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania believe that joining the EU will lead to a wealthier society with improved infrastructure and access to more markets. Underdeveloped economies, high unemployment rates, and restricted access to global markets make the integration vision

tempting (Bieber, Florian, 2018; Bartlett W. , 2008). For instance, Kosovo's economy, which struggles with limited industrial capacity and a heavy reliance on remittances, has shown a strong desire for economic development through EU integration (Bank T. W., Kosovo Country Overview, 2020). The anticipated positive impact is expected to spur foreign direct investment, guarantee access to the single market, and consequently accelerate economic growth (Bartlett W. , 2008). This utilitarian view is particularly relevant among Albanian communities, as they expect integration to reduce economic disparities, decrease informal economies, and modernize the economy (Palmer M. J., 1995).

However, there is also skepticism due to possible increased competition, greater regulatory burdens, and potential adverse economic effects (Bechev, 2003). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) might fear that they will lose out to already well-established EU businesses, potentially leading to losses and unemployment. Additionally, the EU's strict regulatory requirements may challenge industries not yet adapted to these standards (Bechev, 2003). For instance, Albania's agriculture sector, which employs a significant portion of the population, may struggle to meet EU standards, potentially affecting its competitiveness (Report, 2018). These concerns are significant because they influence how individuals and business owners weigh the potential costs and benefits of EU membership. For many, these economic challenges could temper otherwise positive views on integration, especially if public awareness around these risks is high.

The theory of domestic proxies suggests that citizens' views on the EU are shaped by how they perceive their national government's performance. In countries where trust in national institutions is low (for example, due to corruption, inefficiency, or political instability), the EU might be seen as a positive force for change and improved governance. In Albania, for instance, widespread corruption and a weak rule of law have led some citizens to view EU integration as a pathway to reforming domestic institutions and enhancing governance standards (International, 2021). The EU's focus on the rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, and democratic principles aligns with citizens' desires for better governance. Polls reflect this sentiment, showing that Albanians often report greater trust in EU institutions compared to their national government (Monitor, 2010).

In contrast, in countries where citizens hold favorable views of their national government, EU integration may be seen as unnecessary or even a threat to national sovereignty. In North Macedonia, for example, segments of the population who are satisfied with national governance might resist EU membership if they perceive it as a potential risk to national autonomy or fear it may bring unfavorable policies (Solingen, 2011). The Prespa Agreement

in the name dispute with Greece raised concerns over national identity and sovereignty, leading to skepticism about the EU's influence on domestic affairs (Vangeli, 2011). This dichotomy underscores the significance of domestic political contexts in shaping EU perceptions. Moreover, support for the EU does not depend solely on the EU's attributes but also on how citizens perceive their own governments.

Another key factor influencing public opinion on EU integration is the interplay between the mass public and political elites. Political elites shape public attitudes through top-down messaging, framing EU membership in ways that align with their political agendas (Marco R. Steenbergen, 2007). Leaders in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia advocate for EU integration by emphasizing its benefits for economic development, political stability, and enhanced international standing. They use the EU accession process as an opportunity to promote reforms and rally public support (Šabić A. E., 2018). For instance, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama consistently links EU integration with modernization and anti-corruption efforts (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). This elite-driven perspective on integration can have a strong influence on public sentiment, as leaders serve as both policymakers and opinion shapers. However, it also raises the risk of backlash if public expectations are not met or if political leaders are seen as using EU integration as a political tool rather than a national interest. Conversely, nationalist and Eurosceptic parties emphasize potential threats to sovereignty, cultural identity, and economic autonomy. In North Macedonia, certain political factions have expressed reservations about EU conditions that may require concessions on national identity issues, such as the country's name change under the Prespa Agreement with Greece (Vangeli, 2011). The study's particular focus, which aims to comprehend how various stages of EU integration affect public perception among Albanian populations that are politically varied but culturally and historically intertwined, is likewise in line with this chapter. Policymakers, academics, and other stakeholders engaged in the EU enlargement process can benefit from this sophisticated study since it clarifies the intricate concerns that must be taken into account for successful integration (Wilson, 2000).

Political psychology, particularly cognitive mobilization and identity, further diversifies public attitudes. Cognitive mobilization involves citizens' increased political awareness and participation, which can drive greater support for EU integration as people become more informed about its benefits (Inglehart R. , 1970). According to Inglehart, citizens with higher education levels and political awareness are more likely to grasp the complexities of EU integration and may support it due to perceived economic and political advantages. Research has demonstrated that there is often a positive relationship between education, access to

diverse media, and exposure to EU information, which correlates with higher support for integration among urban populations in Albania compared to rural districts (Bojičić-Dželilović, 2009).

Social identity theory emphasizes how national and European identities shape attitudes toward the EU (Marks L. H., 2001). In regions with strong national identities, such as among Albanian populations, EU integration might appear as a threat to cultural heritage and sovereignty, leading to ambivalence or opposition. The preservation of Albanian identity is of significant concern, as there are fears that integration into the broader European framework may dilute traditional customs and languages. On the other hand, people who identify more as European and cosmopolitan are more likely to be in favor of integration because they perceive it as an opportunity for mutual enrichment and cultural interchange (Bruter, 2003). In Kosovo, the aspiration for international recognition and integration into European structures is closely tied to national identity and state-building processes. Media framing is a significant factor influencing public perception of the EU. As a primary information source, the media can craft narratives through selective emphasis and framing (Boomgaarden, 2006). In the Western Balkans, media outlets differ in their portrayal of the EU. Some highlight the positives of integration, including success stories, economic aid, and developmental opportunities (Commission, Albania 2020 Report, 2020g). EU-funded media projects in the region aim to raise awareness and understanding of the EU among citizens (Monitor, 2010). Other outlets take a skeptical or nationalist approach, focusing on potential sovereignty losses, cultural identity risks, or negative local economic impacts (Krasniqi, 2010). In North Macedonia, media polarization often mirrors political divisions, with certain outlets criticizing the EU for perceived biases or interference.

Social media, widely used by younger demographics, frequently disseminates unverified information, fueling misinformation and polarized perspectives (Vangeli, 2011). Eurosceptic narratives in certain media may heighten concerns over sovereignty and cultural identity, influencing public opinion and potentially impeding integration. Disinformation campaigns, sometimes driven by external actors, aim to erode trust in the EU and democratic institutions (Boomgaarden, 2006). Given the complexities of EU accession, the media's role in shaping public opinion is critical, as accurate information is essential for public understanding (Commission, European, 2021a).

In conclusion, integrating these theoretical perspectives enables a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping public attitudes toward EU integration among Albanians in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. The interplay of self-interest, ideology,

knowledge, education, and demographic factors provides a nuanced framework for analyzing support for or skepticism about EU membership (Palmer M. J., 1995; McLaren, 2006). Recognizing the motivations behind these attitudes is essential for policymakers and stakeholders working to navigate the integration process. This study aims to contribute to existing literature and provide practical insights for the EU enlargement process by examining economic expectations, political trust, cultural identity concerns, and the influence of political elites and media (Krasniqi, 2010; Šabić A. E., 2018).

## 2.2 Economic Development, EU Support Programs, and Public Expectations

One of the crucial bases for seeking European Union membership for Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia is economic development. The promise of improved infrastructure, economic prosperity, and broader market access drives public support for integration in these countries. From a political economy and rationality perspective, individuals evaluate the EU based on cost-benefit calculations (Trenz, 2019), assessing how membership might impact both their personal economic situations and the national economy in the short and long term (Michael Marsh, 2007). For many in these nations, the potential for stable economic growth through EU membership offers a compelling vision for the future, but significant economic challenges must first be addressed.

In Kosovo, the economy faces fundamental challenges, including high unemployment especially among the youth and reliance on diaspora remittances (Bank T. W., Kosovo Country Overview, 2020). Limited industrial capacity and restricted access to international markets stymie economic growth. Many Kosovars view EU membership as a pathway to attract foreign direct investment, create jobs, and integrate into the global economy (Bartlett W. , 2008). Alignment with EU standards and regulations is expected to boost economic competitiveness and promote sustainable development.

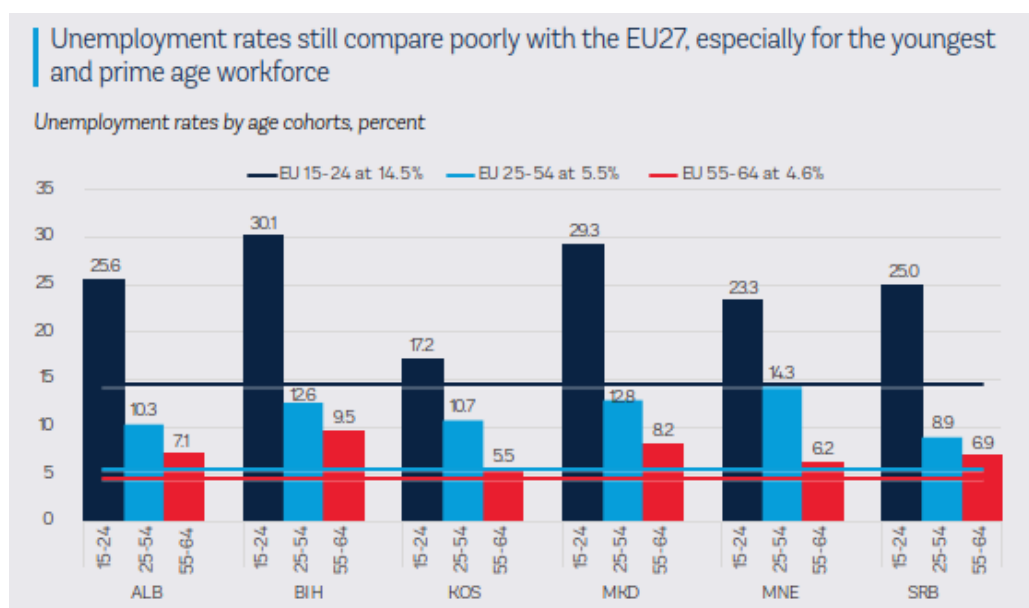
Albania has seen gradual economic growth in recent years but continues to struggle with pervasive poverty, income inequality, and regional disparities (Development, 2021). The economy heavily relies on agriculture, tourism, and energy sectors that require modernization and investment. Approximately 40% of Albania's workforce is employed in agriculture, characterized by low productivity and fragmented landholdings (Report, 2018). EU integration is viewed as a chance to enhance economic competitiveness, access structural funds, and benefit from cohesion policies aimed at reducing regional disparities. The prospect

of EU accession has already spurred reforms in public administration, the judiciary, and economic governance to improve the investment climate and support sustainable development (Commission, Albania 2020 Report, 2020g). However, sustaining this reform momentum is essential to meet EU accession criteria and satisfy public expectations for economic improvement.

Over recent years, North Macedonia has steadily diversified its economy, achieving growth in sectors like manufacturing, services, and information technology. However, it still grapples with high unemployment and the need for structural reforms. Although the unemployment rate has declined, it remains notably high, impacting social stability and economic prospects (Bank T. W., North Macedonia Country Overview, 2021a). Given its strategic location as a transit route in the Balkans, North Macedonia is well-positioned to benefit from EU connectivity initiatives. EU membership is anticipated to bring enhanced trade opportunities, infrastructure development, and integration into European value chains. The resolution of the name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement has paved the way for furthering EU accession talks, aligning with public expectations for economic advancement (Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x). Despite ongoing internal and external challenges, this agreement has also demonstrated North Macedonia's commitment to settling regional conflicts as part of its integration process.

To support these integration efforts, the European Union has launched various programs to address public demands for economic development. The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) offers candidate and prospective candidate nations financial and technical support, supporting reforms in rule of law, governance, human rights, and economic development (Commission, European, 2021a; Nicolas Tavitian, 2008). With a budget of approximately €14.2 billion for 2021–2027, the IPA III reflects the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans' integration process (Commission, EU Pre-Accession Assistance to the Western Balkans, 2021b). Given that economic growth is essential to building public support for integration, the EU's strategic interest in stabilizing the region is demonstrated by the sizeable financial commitment.

Figure 1.1: Age-Group Unemployment Comparisons: Western Balkans vs. EU Averages



Source: Adapted from World Bank (2023), “Regional Economic Updates for the Western Balkans.”

In Kosovo, IPA funds have been essential for advancing public administration reforms, judicial independence, and anti-corruption measures. Examples of these projects include strengthening law enforcement capacities, improving border management, and supporting civil society initiatives (Commission, European, 2020a). In Albania, the IPA has prioritized strengthening democratic institutions, economic competitiveness, and environmental protection. It has funded infrastructure projects like road networks and energy systems to improve connectivity and sustainability (Commission, Albania 2020 Report, 2020g). North Macedonia has also utilized IPA funds for public administration reforms, economic diversification, and aligning with EU environmental and energy policies. Initiatives include enhancing judicial efficiency, promoting social inclusion, and supporting SMEs (Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x). These targeted investments contribute not only to national development but also to regional stability by promoting good governance and accountability in alignment with EU standards.

The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, introduced by the European Commission in 2020, seeks to promote sustainable economic recovery, encourage the adoption of green and digital innovations, and advance regional integration in alignment with EU objectives (Commission, European, 2020c; Ivana Petkanovska, 2022). The plan features flagship initiatives in sustainable transport and energy infrastructure, private sector support, and human capital investment, leveraging up to €9 billion in public and private funding.

These initiatives target structural weaknesses, job creation, and enhanced competitiveness to meet public expectations for economic improvement (Commission, European, 2020c). The emphasis on green and digital transformation aligns with the EU's broader agenda, making these countries' economies more resilient and competitive within the EU's single market framework.

However, realizing the full benefits of EU support programs remains challenging. Issues such as corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and political instability can limit the effectiveness of EU assistance, potentially leading to public disillusionment (Bieber, 2011). There is a perception in some areas that EU funds do not reach those most in need or are misused due to weak governance structures. The domestic proxies theory suggests that citizens' views of the EU are shaped by their perceptions of national government performance. If citizens see national institutions as corrupt or inefficient, they may hope that EU integration could improve governance and economic conditions (Trenz, 2019). This theory underscores the necessity for transparent governance, as the misuse of funds can erode trust in both domestic and EU institutions, threatening public support for integration.

Conversely, some groups express skepticism about potential economic drawbacks of EU membership. The EU's strict regulatory standards could challenge industries not yet aligned with these requirements. SMEs, in particular, fear they may struggle to compete with established EU businesses, which could lead to losses and unemployment. Albania's agricultural sector faces a unique challenge, as it may struggle to comply with EU standards, threatening competitiveness and livelihoods (Report, 2018). These concerns reflect the rational assessments of individuals weighing the costs and benefits of integration, underscoring the need to address such apprehensions to maintain public support. Such skepticism is rooted in practical concerns, as integration often requires significant adjustments for local industries to meet EU standards, potentially impacting employment and economic stability. Another factor shaping public attitudes toward EU membership is the anticipated adoption of the euro as a common currency. Kosovo unilaterally adopted the euro in 2002, providing currency stability but deferring monetary policy control to European authorities (Bank E. C., 2021). While using the euro facilitates trade and investment, it also restricts Kosovo's ability to adjust monetary policy for domestic economic needs. Meanwhile, Albania and North Macedonia retain their national currencies but aim to join the Eurozone. The potential advantages of currency stability and reduced transaction costs are weighed against concerns over the loss of monetary sovereignty and the strict convergence criteria for Eurozone entry (Stiglitz, 2016). Public attitudes toward the euro reflect both optimism for

economic integration and caution over monetary control. The euro's adoption represents a symbol of economic integration, yet it remains contentious due to fears of monetary dependence on the European Central Bank.

Media plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of economic development and EU support programs. As a primary information source, the media frames narratives about the EU's regional role. Positive reporting on successful EU-funded projects and tangible improvements can foster support for integration, with examples such as EU-backed infrastructure projects or educational opportunities enhancing the EU's image (Trenz, 2019). Conversely, negative or biased reporting can fuel skepticism, particularly if EU assistance is seen as ineffective or poorly managed. Investigative journalism that reveals corruption in EU-funded projects can erode trust in both national institutions and the EU (Insight, 2023). Understanding media influence is key, as it shapes public expectations and perceptions of the EU's role in economic development.

Public expectations are further influenced by the interaction between mass publics and political elites. Political leaders may emphasize the economic benefits of EU membership to gain support, framing integration as a remedy for domestic economic challenges. Leaders might highlight potential market access, investment opportunities, and financial assistance (Šabić A. E., 2018). However, if the anticipated benefits are not realized or if the public perceives slow progress, support for integration may decline. Nationalist and Eurosceptic parties may leverage economic concerns to argue against EU membership, underscoring perceived threats to domestic industries and economic sovereignty (Bieber, Florian, 2018). The dual contribution of political psychology and cognitive mobilization can affect how people process information on economic development and EU integration. More educated and politically aware citizens are likely to have a more nuanced understanding of the economic impacts of EU membership, recognizing both opportunities and challenges (Inglehart R. , 1970). In contrast, those with limited access to information or low political awareness may rely on simplified narratives or be more vulnerable to misinformation. Social identity concerns also intersect with economic expectations: some may feel that close economic ties with the EU could dilute national culture or erode national identity, while others see economic progress as a way to boost national pride and enhance their country's standing in Europe (Marks L. H., 2001; Bruter, 2003). These identity factors shape how economic arguments are perceived and whether they translate into support for EU membership.

In conclusion, economic development and EU support programs are central to the public discourse on integration for Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. The potential for

economic progress drives support for EU membership, but concerns about potential drawbacks and the effectiveness of EU assistance may temper enthusiasm (Trenz, 2019; Bartlett W. , 2008). To encourage public support for European integration, policymakers must have an advanced comprehension of the economic expectations, governmental perceptions, media influence, and identity-based concerns. Maintaining and improving public trust in the integration process requires addressing public concerns, making sure EU funds are used transparently and effectively, and outlining the concrete advantages of integration (Commission, European, 2020c; Bieber, Florian, 2018).

## 2.3 Political Ideology, Sovereignty, and Public Knowledge of the EU

Public attitudes toward EU integration within Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia are influenced by political ideology and concerns over national sovereignty. Citizens' perceptions of national autonomy and their understanding of the EU shape their views on the benefits and challenges of membership (Bieber, Florian, 2018).

Understanding the unique ideological and cultural influences in each nation's approach to EU integration is crucial because of the complex environment that is created for public opinion by the intersection of ideology, sovereignty, and knowledge.

From a theoretical perspective on the interaction between mass publics and political elites, political leaders and parties play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse on EU integration (Marco R. Steenbergen, 2007). In these countries, political parties vary in their support for EU membership, often aligning their positions with ideological stances on national sovereignty, identity, and governance. This alignment reflects how political ideology influences not only party policies but also broader public sentiment, making party positions a crucial factor in understanding EU support levels.

In Albania, major political parties typically support EU integration, viewing it as a strategic objective for national development and modernization (Commission, Albania 2020 Report, 2020g). The ruling Socialist Party emphasizes alignment with European standards and the importance of reforms in judiciary, public administration, and economic policy. The opposition Democratic Party also advocates for EU membership but takes a different approach to reforms and often critiques the government's progress (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Although there is broad political agreement regarding the objective of EU integration, ideological differences influence the specific paths to achieving it, demonstrating that support for the EU does not preclude critique of domestic governance practices (Bartlett W. , 2008).

In Kosovo, political parties present a range of views on EU integration, influenced by issues of sovereignty and statehood. The Democratic League of Kosovo, for instance, supports integration as a pathway to secure international recognition and promote economic development (LDK, 2020). In contrast, more nationalist-oriented parties may express skepticism toward external influences that they perceive as undermining Kosovo's autonomy, though they generally support EU membership in principle (Krasniqi, Gëzim, 2018). These differences add complexity to the political discourse on integration, especially given Kosovo's unique challenges around statehood and its relationship with Serbia. The EU's role as a facilitator in Kosovo-Serbia dialogues further complicates the integration debate by interlinking sovereignty concerns with international diplomacy.

The political scene in North Macedonia is divided over issues of national identity and sovereignty, especially following the Prespa Agreement with Greece, which mandated a name change to resolve a long-standing dispute (Vangeli, 2011). The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, which supports EU membership, views integration as essential for economic development and regional stability (Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x). In contrast, nationalist parties voice concerns over concessions made and potential erosion of national identity, reflecting ideological divisions that shape public views on the EU.

These dynamics highlight how ideological leanings influence public support for EU integration. Those aligned with pro-European parties may favor membership, associating it with modernization, economic growth, and alignment with democratic values. Conversely, supporters of nationalist or Eurosceptic parties may emphasize preserving national sovereignty and culture, expressing skepticism over the impact of integration on national autonomy. This ideological spectrum demonstrates that support for EU integration is not uniform but varies based on how closely party values align with either transnational cooperation or national sovereignty.

National sovereignty is closely tied to political ideology and significantly influences attitudes toward the EU. Fears of losing control over domestic policies, legal systems, and economic regulations can lead to apprehension about integration. The EU's supranational structures require member states to cede some degree of sovereignty for the benefits of collective decision-making and shared policies (Marks L. H., 2001). For countries with strong national identities and histories of external domination, such as those in the Western Balkans, balancing sovereignty with integration is a sensitive issue. This tension between sovereignty and integration is evident in the cautious approach many citizens and political groups adopt,

as they weigh the benefits of EU membership against potential restrictions on their national autonomy.

Social identity theory suggests that individuals strongly identifying with their national culture may see EU membership as a threat to their identity and autonomy (Marks L. H., 2001). This perception can lead to ambivalence or opposition to integration, particularly if the EU is viewed as imposing policies that conflict with national interests or cultural norms.

Conversely, those who identify with a European identity alongside their national one may see integration as an opportunity for cultural exchange, enrichment, and increased international influence. This duality underscores the need for EU policymakers to recognize identity concerns when engaging with these populations, as integration is as much a cultural issue as it is an economic or political one.

Political psychology also plays a role in how individuals process information about the EU and form opinions on integration. Cognitive mobilization, or the ability to understand complex political issues and make informed decisions, is a factor (Inglehart R. , 1970). Higher education levels and political awareness tend to increase support for the EU, as people are more likely to recognize potential benefits and navigate the complexities of integration. On the other hand, lack of knowledge or exposure to false information can increase resistance or skepticism. This relationship between education and EU support emphasizes how crucial informed citizens are to maintaining favorable public sentiment toward integration, especially in areas with uneven access to reliable information.

Public knowledge and awareness of the EU are central in shaping attitudes toward membership. Information about the EU's institutions, policies, and the implications of membership enables individuals to make informed judgments. However, in many cases, the public lacks a clear understanding of what the EU entails and what accession would mean. This gap may be filled by media narratives, political rhetoric, or social discourses that may not always be fully accurate (Trenz, 2019). As a result, the quality of information that is spread to the public can greatly influence whether people support or are skeptical of the EU, especially in places where false information is common.

Media effects play a significant role in shaping public knowledge and perceptions. As a primary information source on the EU, media framing of news and commentary influences public attitudes.

In the Western Balkans, the media landscape is diverse, with varying degrees of independence and professionalism. Information is disseminated by state-controlled media, private outlets, and social media platforms. Misinformation and disinformation campaigns, sometimes driven

by external actors, can skew public perceptions of the EU. Social media platforms, in particular, accelerate the spread of unverified information, contributing to polarized views and reinforcing individual biases (Szicherle, 2017). In politically divided societies, where media fragmentation expands ideological fractures and shapes perceptions of EU integration, this dynamic is particularly challenging.

Political trust also intersects with public knowledge about the EU. Where trust in national and EU institutions is high, individuals are more receptive to official information and confident in the integration process (Trenz, 2019). Conversely, low trust may lead to skepticism toward official narratives, making people more susceptible to alternative or misleading information (Szicherle, 2017). These dynamic highlights the importance of building and maintaining trust through transparency, accountability, and effective communication. Without a foundation of trust, even accurate information about the EU may struggle to alter negative perceptions, emphasizing the need for credibility in both national and EU-level communications.

Education is essential for enhancing civic knowledge and fostering informed attitudes toward the EU. Educational programs on European studies, civic education, and critical media literacy empower individuals to critically engage with information and develop nuanced views on integration. These initiatives help bridge knowledge gaps and combat misinformation (Inglehart R. , 1970). Promoting media literacy and civic education, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, could counteract the effects of misinformation and enable citizens to make informed decisions about EU integration.

In conclusion, political ideology, concerns over national sovereignty, and public knowledge of the EU are interconnected factors that significantly shape public attitudes toward EU integration in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. The interaction between political elites and mass publics frames the integration debate, with parties and leaders positioning the issue according to ideological stances (Marco R. Steenbergen, 2007). National sovereignty concerns reflect historical experiences and identity considerations, affecting how citizens weigh the benefits and challenges of membership. Public knowledge and awareness are necessary to make informed decisions and build support for integration. Education, transparent communication, and media engagement can help address knowledge gaps (Trenz, 2019; Inglehart R. , 1970). Policymakers and stakeholders must acknowledge the importance of these factors and develop strategic approaches that increase understanding, build trust, and address legitimate concerns.

These theoretical perspectives provide a framework for examining how political ideology, sovereignty concerns, and knowledge influence support for EU membership among Albanians

in the three countries. This understanding is important for creating effective policy and communication strategies that align with public expectations and facilitate the integration process.

## 2.4 Cultural and Identity Concerns, Religion, and Political Group Discord

Cultural identity plays an enduring role in shaping public attitudes toward EU integration in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. Social identity theory suggests that national and cultural identities are key in forming citizens' views about supranational organizations, such as the EU (Marks L. H., 2001). In this context, the "Albanian factor" is particularly influential. Albanian communities across these countries maintain deep transnational ties, rooted in a common language, history, and collective identity (Pusc, 2014).

These shared cultural elements foster a collective pro-European sentiment that often reinforces public support for integration, while also amplifying concerns about preserving ethnic and cultural identity in a larger EU framework.

In Kosovo, the political landscape features parties that represent distinct facets of Albanian nationalism and approaches to EU integration. The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), founded by the late Ibrahim Rugova, has long advocated for peaceful resistance and pro-European policies (Joyce Apsel, 2019). LDK views EU integration as essential for securing international recognition, fostering economic development, and strengthening democracy. In supporting EU-oriented reforms, particularly in governance and rule of law, the LDK emphasizes alignment with EU values as a means to bolster Kosovo's global standing. Vetëvendosje, led by Albin Kurti, represents a more nationalist and populist stance. While supporting the concept of EU membership, Vetëvendosje focuses on national sovereignty, social justice, and self-determination (Krasniqi, Gëzim, 2018). It often criticizes external influences perceived as threats to Kosovo's autonomy, including certain EU interventions. This reflects a segment of the population that views integration with cautious optimism, supporting EU membership while prioritizing Kosovo's sovereign rights in negotiations with international bodies. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), emerging from the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, also supports EU integration but has faced criticism for governance issues and alleged corruption. This interplay among parties illustrates the diversity of views on Kosovo's approach to EU integration, balancing aspirations for

membership with concerns for sovereignty and national identity.

In Albania, political parties are generally unified in their support for EU integration, viewing it as a strategic objective for national development and modernization. The Socialist Party (PS), led by Prime Minister Edi Rama, has pursued a clear pro-European agenda, emphasizing the need for reforms in justice, public administration, and economic development to meet EU accession criteria. The party highlights the benefits of EU membership, such as economic growth, increased foreign investment, and enhanced international standing (Commission, Albania 2020 Report, 2020g). The Democratic Party (PD), the main opposition, supports EU integration but takes on a more critical role, focusing on the government's progress regarding necessary reforms, particularly in corruption and the rule of law. While both major parties advocate for EU membership, political fragmentation and allegations of electoral misconduct can slow the reform process (Ker-Lindsay, 2015). Smaller parties and nationalist factions sometimes express concerns over potential losses of sovereignty or cultural dilution, though these views are less dominant in the political discourse.

In North Macedonia, the political landscape is more complex due to ethnic divisions and historical disputes. The nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party has expressed reservations about EU-related concessions, including the Prespa Agreement with Greece, which required renaming the country to the Republic of North Macedonia (Vangeli, 2011).

The party stresses the importance of preserving national identity and sovereignty, and its supporters may view EU conditionality skeptically.

In contrast, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), formerly led by Zoran Zaev and currently by Dimitar Kovačevski, champions EU membership and has taken major steps to resolve disputes with neighboring countries to advance integration. The SDSM focuses on democratic reforms, economic development, and fostering good relations with neighbors as pathways to EU accession (Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x). The party's policies resonate with a segment of the population that strongly supports integration and is prepared to make significant compromises for it. This highlights the SDSM's strategy to balance national priorities with EU membership requirements, appealing to those who view integration as a path to economic and social progress.

Albanian parties in North Macedonia, such as the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the Alliance for Albanians (AA), and the Besa Movement, play significant roles in the political process. These parties typically support EU accession, viewing it as beneficial for minority rights, regional integration, and economic opportunities (Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x). They advocate for fully implementing the Ohrid Framework

Agreement on minority rights and power-sharing. Their presence adds complexity to the discourse on EU integration, bringing the Albanian perspective into the national conversation. Recent developments suggest that Albanian parties continue to exert considerable influence on North Macedonia's political scene. The DUI (BDI), under Ali Ahmeti's leadership, has been a key government coalition partner, pushing for increased inclusion of Albanians in state institutions (Insight, 2023). In 2023, tensions surfaced within the DUI(BDI) due to leadership disputes and strategic differences, reflecting internal challenges. The Alliance for Albanians and the Besa Movement have also been actively advocating for language rights, fair resource distribution, and anti-corruption efforts.

Political disagreements often stem from differing views on national priorities and the perceived value of EU membership, which can hinder cohesive support for EU accession. In Kosovo, disagreements over negotiations with Serbia may contribute to public perceptions of stalled progress. Parties like Vetëvendosje, which advocate a strong stance on sovereignty, may resist external pressures perceived as compromising national interests, creating tensions with parties more willing to engage in dialogue and compromise to further EU integration (Krasniqi, Gëzim, 2018; Insight, 2023; Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x). In Albania, political polarization between the PS and PD has deepened, particularly following the 2021 parliamentary elections. The PD has faced internal divisions, with former leader Sali Berisha openly challenging the current leadership. These internal conflicts have reduced the party's effectiveness as a constructive opposition and may impact Albania's reform process for EU accession. Allegations of corruption and electoral irregularities further exacerbate distrust among political actors and may erode public confidence in the integration process (Commission, Albania 2020 Report, 2020g; International, 2021).

In North Macedonia, political discord is compounded by a legacy of ethnic Macedonian and Albanian tensions, which can influence EU integration perceptions, especially if integration is seen as favoring one group over another. The VMRO-DPMNE remains opposed to certain government initiatives related to EU integration, including constitutional amendments required to meet Bulgaria's conditions. Nationalist narratives may frame EU conditionality as infringing on sovereignty or identity, impacting public attitudes toward membership (Vangeli, 2011; Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x). These identity-based divisions indicate how EU integration can polarize opinions, especially when national identity and autonomy are perceived to be at stake.

Cultural identity concerns play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward EU integration. Citizens may fear that aligning with EU standards could dilute local customs and traditions in

favor of a more homogenized European identity. In Albania, discussions around cultural preservation focus on maintaining language purity, traditional music, and rural lifestyles amid modernization pressures (Elsie, 2010). Similar concerns exist in Kosovo and among ethnic Macedonians in North Macedonia, where preserving cultural heritage is seen as integral to national identity (Krasniqi, Gëzim, 2018).

Religion, although a key element of cultural identity, does not significantly influence Albanians' attitudes toward EU membership. Historically, Albanians have fostered a strong secular national identity that transcends religious affiliations (Elsie, 2010). In Kosovo and Albania, Muslim-majority populations coexist with other religious groups, with a strong emphasis on religious tolerance and secular governance. Shared national goals, such as economic development, international recognition, and alignment with European values, drive pro-EU sentiments regardless of religious background (Commission, European, 2020c). With this in mind, religious influence is minimal, allowing for a focus on the economic and cultural dimensions of EU integration in shaping public opinion.

Taking this into account, the survey did not directly address religious matters, as it operates on the premise that religious affiliation plays a negligible role in shaping Albanians' perspectives on EU integration. Instead, the study prioritizes examining factors such as economic expectations, political trust, knowledge and awareness, and cultural identity concerns, which are deemed to exert a more substantial influence on public opinion. Media framing also shapes public perceptions; negative portrayals can amplify concerns over identity and sovereignty. Nationalist media outlets may emphasize the threats that EU integration poses to cultural heritage, language, and tradition, as seen in Kosovo, where EU demands for dialogue with Serbia may be viewed as undermining national interests (Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x). In Albania, sensationalist coverage of EU criticisms or delays in accession can fuel public discontent and skepticism (Monitor, 2010). Disinformation and biased reporting, particularly from nationalist outlets, highlight the role of media in shaping identity-focused apprehensions. Disinformation campaigns, often driven by external actors with destabilizing motives, can erode confidence in democratic institutions and the EU (Szicherle, 2017).

Addressing these challenges requires domestic political cooperation and nuanced approaches by the EU, taking each country's context into account. Promoting inclusive dialogues that respect cultural and identity concerns while highlighting shared values and the benefits of EU membership is essential. The EU has implemented programs to foster intercultural dialogue, preserve cultural heritage, and support minority rights, recognizing these as crucial in the

integration process (Commission, European, 2021a). Promoting mutual understanding achievable through support for civil society organizations, cultural initiatives, and educational programs can help ease concerns about cultural loss. EU-funded projects in the Western Balkans, such as youth exchanges, cultural festivals, and language-preservation efforts, are designed to build bridges between communities and foster a European identity alongside national identities.

These considerations directly shaped the design of the survey instrument in this study, which focuses on capturing the main influences on public attitudes toward EU membership, including economic expectations, political ideology, knowledge and awareness, and cultural identity concerns among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo (Monitor, 2010).

In conclusion, popular perceptions of EU integration in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia are specifically shaped by cultural identity, political party dynamics, and internal strife. The “Albanian factor” interconnects national identity with regional aspirations, influencing political discourse. Religion was excluded as a primary variable, as it has minimal impact on Albanians’ views on EU integration, in line with the survey’s focus.

Successfully navigating these complexities is crucial for establishing a cohesive pathway to EU membership for these Western Balkan nations. Public support can be built by strengthening social cohesion, promoting inclusive governance, and addressing identity concerns through respectful, transparent policies. EU engagement must be attuned to these dynamics, offering support that resonates with local contexts and aspirations. Acknowledging cultural and identity concerns while supporting democratic institutions and civil society will help policymakers create an integration process that is both inclusive and sustainable.

### 3. Methodology

This chapter discusses the research design and methods adopted to explore what determines the public opinion among Albanian populations in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia on EU membership. Guided by the theoretical frameworks and hypotheses already presented in Chapters 1 and 2, this study follows a quantitative research approach, using a structured survey instrument administered in Albanian. The methodology includes detailed descriptions of the survey design, sampling procedures, data collection methods, and the statistical analyses employed. This approach ensures academic rigor and alignment with established

theoretical models and empirical studies related to EU integration in general, as well as the specific case of the "Albanian factor."

### 3.1 Research Design and Survey Instrument

The basic aim of the paper is to assess how economic expectations, political ideology, knowledge about the EU, and issues of cultural identity influence public support for EU integration among Albanians in the Western Balkans. Drawing on and extending the model of self-interest, ideology, knowledge, education, and demographic factors developed by Blinder and Krueger (2004), the present research explicitly relates the following constructs: economic expectations (H1), political trust, and ideology (H4 through its relationship to ideology), cultural identity/sovereignty concerns (H2), and EU knowledge (H3) to those in the model put forward by Blinder and Krueger. This model, therefore, serves as the framework for self-interest, ideology, knowledge, education, and demographic determinants of public opinion concerning economic policy (Blinder, 2004). The present study follows a modification of this model, as proposed by Alan Blinder in 2004, to EU integration for the target region. Based on what is discussed in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework amalgamates the political economy/rationality (Palmer M. J., 1995; Toshkov D. K., 2014), domestic proxies theory (Bieber, 2011), social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979), and interaction between mass publics and the political elites. The research design is cross-sectional, capturing a snapshot of attitudes toward EU membership at one point in time. Such a design is relevant for exploratory studies aiming to identify relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014). Although it limits the ability to infer causality or observe changes over time, it provides insights into current opinions and the factors shaping them (Babbie, 2010).

The survey instrument was meticulously designed to capture the key constructs outlined in the theoretical framework and hypotheses. To ensure that the survey items align clearly with our hypotheses and the Blinder & Krueger model's constructs, the questionnaire sections on economic expectations directly measure self-interest influences (H1), political ideology and sovereignty questions address ideological and national-autonomy concerns (H2), knowledge items capture levels of EU policy awareness (H3), and demographic plus trust variables connect to both self-interest and domestic proxies theory (H4).

The survey was designed in accordance with best practices for survey research, ensuring clarity, brevity, and relevance of questions to minimize respondent burden and maximize data quality (Bernstein, 1994; Bethlehem, Jelke, 2010).

The questionnaire consisted of 33 closed-ended questions, structured into six sections, as follows:

- Demographic Information:* This section collected data on respondents' age, sex, education level, employment status, urban/rural residence, and country of birth. These demographic variables are, in fact, controlling and analytic variables that help analyze opinion variation across social groups (Inglehart R. , 1970; McLaren, 2006). Data on country of birth enabled comparisons across Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, taking into account the "Albanian factor" and its transnational influence dealt with in Chapters 1 and 2. Respondents were also asked about their political affiliation to capture the potential influence of political alignment on EU attitudes.

- Economic Expectations:* This section evaluated respondents' views of the possible economic effects of EU membership on both a personal and national level, taking into consideration Hypothesis 1 and acknowledging the influence of economic self-interest in influencing public opinion (Palmer M. J., 1995; Toshkov D. D., 2011). The survey questions were Likert-style, with answer choices ranging from "Significant Improvement" on one extreme to "Significant Deterioration" on the other. Factors ranged from job prospects and individual financial situations to the level of economic competition and aspects of economic sovereignty.

- Political Ideology and Sovereignty Concerns:* This section tested respondents' political orientations and concerns regarding national sovereignty, addressing Hypothesis 2. Political ideology was measured by asking respondents to place themselves on a spectrum from "Very Liberal" to "Very Conservative." Sovereignty concerns were assessed with questions about the importance of maintaining national sovereignty within the EU integration process and perceptions of the EU's impact on the national political system (Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005; Wilson, 2000). Other items addressed attitudes towards policy options likely to impinge on national sovereignty. These correspond with the ideational and sovereignty-relevant axes in the Blinder & Krueger framing of preferences and reflect how such values of an individual and perceived national-sovereignty costs help form opinion.

- Knowledge and Awareness of the EU:* Following the understanding of information as a factor that shapes attitudes (Blinder, 2004; Boomgaarden, 2006), and reflecting Hypothesis 3, this section measured the knowledge of our respondents regarding basic EU institutions, policies, and the accession process. There were both self-assessed knowledge questions, as well as objective questions about factual knowledge. The questions also provided a variety of measures of how regularly respondents gather information about the EU, the importance of feelings of being informed, and source usage measures. These measures respond directly to

the Blinder & Krueger emphasis on the role of information and knowledge in shaping mass opinion.

- Cultural and Identity Concerns*: This section discussed issues of cultural preservation and the consequences of EU membership for national identity, in accordance with social identity theory and Hypothesis 2. Questions addressed fears of cultural homogenization, loss of national traditions, and perceived effects of EU membership on strengthening or weakening cultural ties (McLaren, 2006; Bruter, 2003). According to statements about their cultural identity, participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement. Items of a cultural nature in this regard relate to the recognition beyond self-interest that group identity and cultural factors influence attitudes in the theoretical model.

- Overall Support for EU Membership*: The final section captured respondents' general attitude toward EU membership using a five-point scale from "Strongly Oppose" to "Strongly Support." An additional open-ended question invited respondents to identify the primary factor influencing their opinion on EU membership, offering qualitative insights into their key motivations or concerns.

The survey instrument was exclusively composed of closed-ended questions, this design choice facilitates quantitative analysis and ensures consistency in responses. The decision to exclude open-ended questions was made to reduce respondent fatigue and to streamline data processing (Babbie, 2010; Boomgaarden, 2006).

A digital survey format was selected due to its accessibility and efficiency, particularly given the region's substantial smartphone and internet penetration. Nonetheless, this method could introduce a bias by over-representing individuals who are more digitally active.

A pilot test was conducted with 25 participants of the target population to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the survey instrument. Each respondent provided feedback on question wording, comprehension, and overall survey length. Based on this feedback, minor adjustments were made to enhance clarity and reduce potential bias. For example, certain questions were rephrased for better understanding, and ambiguous terms were clarified. Reliability analyses were conducted, calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients for multi-item scales to ensure internal consistency. The scales measuring economic expectations, political ideology, knowledge, and cultural concerns all demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7 (Bernstein, 1994).

Content validity was ensured by grounding the survey questions in established theoretical constructs and prior research (Babbie, 2010; McLaren, 2006). Expert review by academics familiar with the subject matter further validated the instrument's content.

Participants gave informed consent that their response was out of a voluntary condition, free will to take part in the study and at any given time they would withdraw with no penalty imposed on them. The participants were guaranteed their anonymity and confidentiality and therefore no personal data were collected from their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents in adherence to ethical guidelines for research with human subjects (Society, 2014). Data were stored securely, accessible only to the research team, and used solely for academic purposes.

### 3.2 Sample Selection and Data Collection

The research aimed to employ a stratified sampling method to represent the broader population across the three regions, but due to practical constraints, a combination of convenience sampling and online distribution via QR codes was used. This represents a limitation to this nonprobability sampling study (Babbie, 2010). Such limitations can have an impact on whether the sample data can actually be generalized to the population, since it depends on a self-chosen set (Bernstein, 1994). This limitation was tackled in part using post-stratification weights afterward. Participants were reached via online networks, community contacts, and other diverse channels to widen the reach for better demographic coverage. Data collection took approximately two months, during which a variety of images containing Quick Response (QR) codes were prepared and distributed to facilitate easy access. Scanning these QR codes with smartphones or tablets linked participants directly to the survey.

This approach was selected for its practicality and rising popularity in the target regions where mobile device use is widespread (Union, 2020). While this approach increased accessibility and participation, it potentially overrepresents urban, educated, and tech-savvy respondents who have greater internet access. Efforts to include diverse respondents focused on distributing QR codes in rural areas and through community organizations.

The QR codes for the survey were distributed through various channels to reach a broad and diverse sample within the transnational Albanian population. Posters and flyers containing the QR code, and a brief description of the study were strategically placed in high-traffic public locations, including universities, libraries, community centers, cafes, and public transportation hubs. This approach ensured that individuals less active on social media or online platforms could also participate by scanning the code with their mobile devices, linking them directly to the survey (Union, 2020).

In addition, the survey link and QR code were shared through widely used communication

methods such as email lists and messaging apps like WhatsApp and Viber, which are popular in the target regions. This facilitated both personal outreach and easy forwarding, allowing participants to pass along the survey within their networks for broader reach.

On social media, the survey was posted on popular platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter within Albanian-specific groups and pages. This took advantage of high internet and smartphone penetration in the target regions, enabling rapid and widespread dissemination of the survey link.

Finally, the survey was promoted on community websites and forums frequented by the target population, including major news portals, cultural forums, and discussion boards where Albanians often engage in social and political discussions. By using this multi-channel approach, the study aimed to maximize participation and inclusivity, ensuring accessibility for a wide range of respondents.

**Sample Size and Composition:** A total of 663 responses were collected, with 505 valid and complete questionnaires after data cleaning. The final sample included respondents from all three regions: *Albania*: 162 respondents (32%), *Kosovo*: 189 respondents (37,5%) of respondents, *North Macedonia*: 154 respondents (30,5%). To check for representativeness, official demographic statistics were consulted from national statistical offices and Eurostat sources. The exact population distributions of age, gender, education, and urban/rural residence were approximated to the greatest extent possible, although the sample cannot be jointly representative in all these respects.

Demographic characteristics of the sample were as follows: *Gender*: 44,55% female, 55,45% male, *Age*: Mean age of 36 years (range 18–65), *Education Level*: Primary education: 10%, Secondary education: 40%, Higher education: 50%, *Residence*: 60% urban, 40% rural. These demographics reflect an effort to capture a diverse cross-section of the population. However, the actual representativeness of the sample remains contingent upon the degree of alignment with regional demographic benchmarks. Although post-stratification weighting has been applied, such weights can only partially adjust for intrinsic sampling biases (Rubin, 2019). Data cleaning and preparation involved multiple steps to ensure the accuracy and validity of the survey information. All questionnaires were reviewed for completeness, with incomplete responses particularly those missing key variables excluded from the analysis. Consistency checks were conducted to identify and address logical inconsistencies and implausible responses.

The data were then coded and entered into statistical software, with careful attention to formatting and labeling of variables. Categorical variables were appropriately coded, and

continuous variables underwent checks for normality and outliers. For example, the Likert-scale responses were coded from 1 to 5, corresponding to the level of agreement or support. Missing data were handled using suitable methods based on the extent and pattern of missingness (Rubin, 2019). Given that missing data were minimal and appeared to be missing completely at random (MCAR), listwise deletion was applied.

To further refine the dataset, post-stratification weighting was applied to correct for potential sampling biases and improve representativeness. Official demographic statistics were used to create weights, ensuring alignment between the sample and the general population concerning age, gender, education status, and urban or rural residence (Flores-Cervantes, 2003). These weights were calculated for each respondent to ensure that the sample distribution reflected the population distribution on key demographic characteristics, thus reducing bias introduced by the non-probability sampling method.

However, limitations persist due to the basic nature of non-probability sampling methods. It thus has implications for generalizing from the results. This also may lead to an imbalance in the sample, overrepresenting the group of younger people, those highly educated, or those living in cities that have access to the internet. Some forms of bias can be managed and reduced through weighting adjustments, but a complete elimination of biases unobserved is impossible owing to factors not represented during weighting (Bethlehem, Jelke, 2010). Additionally, self-selection bias could occur if individuals with strong opinions on the EU were more likely to participate. For example, those with strong pro-EU sentiments may have been more inclined to complete the survey, potentially skewing results. Consequently, these limitations suggest that the results should be viewed as indicative of trends and associations rather than definitive estimates of population parameters.

### 3.3 Econometric Model and Analytical Approach

The factors that influence the public to have an opinion about their membership in the EU, from the nature of the analysis required for testing the hypotheses outlined in Chapter 1, were examined with an ordinal probit regression model.

In principle, such models are well-suited for analyzing ordered categorical dependent variables that measure levels of support or opposition on a Likert scale (Hensher, 2010). The dependent variable of support for EU membership in this research is a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Oppose" to "Strongly Support." Since these categories are increasing but not necessarily equidistant levels of support, an ordinal choice model such as ordinal

probit or ordered logistic regression is methodologically appropriate. This approach respects the qualitative ordering of responses without imposing unwarranted assumptions about the intervals between categories (Williams, Richard, 2012)

Whereas the first choice fell on an ordinal probit model, robustness was sought in considering the ordered logistic regression model, the proportional odds model. Both have become standard approaches with ordinal data; they differ largely in distributional assumptions made about the error term (Freese, 2014; Williams, Richard, 2012). Results have been estimated for both to check robustness. Such similarities in parameter estimates, as well as statistical significance within specifications, engender greater confidence in the stability of credible findings. This approach to dual estimation ensures that no distribution assumption is critical to core results.

In this study, the dependent variable is Support for EU Membership ( $Y_i$ ), coded from 1 (Strongly Oppose) to 5 (Strongly Support). The independent variables include Economic Expectations ( $ECON_i$ ), Political Ideology ( $IDEO_i$ ), Knowledge and Awareness ( $KNOW_i$ ), Cultural and Identity Concerns ( $CULT_i$ ), and Political Trust ( $PolTrust_i$ ). These variables were carefully operationalized and aligned with the theoretical framework and the econometric analysis presented in Chapter 4. Drawing on the Blinder and Krueger (2004) model of public opinion formation, each independent variable maps onto key theoretical constructs: Economic Expectations ( $ECON_i$ ) capture self-interest motivations related to anticipated material benefits (H1; (Blinder, 2004)); Cultural/Sovereignty Concerns ( $CULT_i$ ) reflect identity and ideological factors influencing perceptions of integration costs (H2; (Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005)); Knowledge ( $KNOW_i$ ) addresses the role of information and cognitive mobilization in shaping informed preferences (H3; (Inglehart R. , 1970; Boomgaarden, 2006)); and Political Trust ( $PolTrust_i$ ) taps into institutional confidence as a proxy for domestic and international governance perceptions (H4; (Citrin J. &, 2004; Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005) ). Ideology ( $IDEO_i$ ) complements these constructs by emphasizing how pre-existing ideological orientations frame the evaluation of EU membership prospects (McLaren, 2006; Toshkov D. D., 2011).

#### Variable Operationalization:

- *Economic Expectations ( $ECON_i$ )*: This series measures the perceived potential economic impacts of EU membership for both personal and national levels. It is obtained by the average of the responses to the questions referring to foreseen changes in job opportunities, the personal financial situation, and the national economy

because of EU membership. Responses range from 1 (Significant Deterioration) to 5 (Significant Improvement).

- *Political Ideology (IDEOi)*: Political Ideology - Respondent self-assessed political orientation on a scale from 1 (Very Liberal) to 5 (Very Conservative). Since attitudes are ideologically pre-conceptualized within individuals, this variable addresses the power of personal ideology on how citizens act upon EU integration.
- *Knowledge and Awareness (KNOWi)*: EU knowledge is measured using objective and subjective measures. Objective knowledge score: On a scale of 0 to 10, the number of accurate responses to factual questions about the EU is added up to determine this score. In addition, self-assessed knowledge is also included as a separate variable in order to capture perceived understanding.
- *Cultural and Identity Concerns (CULTi)*: This variable reflects respondents' concerns regarding the preservation of cultural traits and how EU membership might affect national identity. It is measured by the average of responses to statements of fear regarding cultural homogenization, erosion of traditions, and impact on cultural ties, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).
- *Political Trust (PolTrusti)*: Trust in EU institutions is gauged on a 5-point scale from 1 (No Trust) to 5 (Complete Trust), capturing the degree of confidence respondents have in EU governance structures.
- *Control Variables (Xi)*: To account for demographic influences, control variables include Age (Agei), Gender (Genderi), Education Level (EducLeveli), Employment Status (EmpStatusi), and Urban/Rural Residency (Residencyi). Age is a continuous variable representing the respondent's age in years. Gender is coded as a binary variable (0 = Female, 1 = Male). Education level is an ordinal variable coded from 1 (Primary Education) to 3 (Higher Education). Employment status is categorized (e.g., Employed Full-Time, Unemployed), and residency is a binary variable (0 = Rural, 1 = Urban).

#### Econometric Model Specification:

The ordinal probit model estimates the probability that an individual's latent propensity to support EU membership ( $y_i^*$ ) falls within a particular category:

$$y_i^* = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ECON}_i + \beta_2 \text{IDEO}_i + \beta_3 \text{KNOW}_i + \beta_4 \text{CULT}_i + \beta_5 \text{PolTrust}_i + \gamma \text{Xi} + \epsilon_i$$

$$y_i = j \text{ if } \mu_{j-1} < y_i^* \leq \mu_j$$

where:

$y_i^x$ : Unobserved latent variable representing the propensity to support EU membership.

$y_i$ : Observed ordinal response (1 to 5).

$\beta_0$ : Intercept term.

$\beta_1$ – $\beta_5$ : Coefficients for independent variables.

$\gamma$ : Vector of coefficients for control variables  $X_i$ .

$\epsilon_i$ : Error term, assumed to follow a standard normal distribution.

$\mu_j$ : Threshold parameters separating response categories.

#### Assumptions and Diagnostic Tests:

The model relies on several key assumptions:

- Proportional Odds (Parallel Regression Assumption): The relationship between each independent variable and the log odds of the dependent variable is consistent across all outcome categories. The Brant test was conducted to assess this assumption (Brant, 1990). The test indicated that the assumption held for most variables. For variables where violations were detected, such as IDEOi, alternative models like the generalized ordered probit model were considered to ensure robustness.
- Independence of Observations: Responses are assumed to be independent across individuals.
- Error Term Distribution: The error terms  $\epsilon_i$  are assumed to be normally distributed with mean zero and constant variance.

Diagnostic tests were performed to validate these assumptions and the integrity of the model:

- Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs): VIFs were calculated for all independent variables to check for multicollinearity. All VIF values were below 2.5, indicating no significant multicollinearity issues (O'Brien, 2007).
- Goodness-of-Fit Measures: Pseudo R-squared (McFadden's  $R^2$ ) provided an indication of model fit. A Likelihood Ratio Test compared the fitted model to an intercept-only model, and a significant chi-square statistic indicated that the model with independent variables fits better than the null model.

Estimation Techniques and Software: Model parameters were estimated by available MLE methods in Stata Version 17 and R Version 4.0.3 (StataCorp, 2019; R Core Team, 2020).

MLE is appropriate for ordinal outcome models since it yields consistent and efficient estimates. We estimated robust standard errors by accounting for heteroskedasticity of

variance through robust variance estimators (White, 1980). Beyond that, we clustered standard errors by region, taking intragroup correlation within countries into account. This clustering approach acknowledges potential similarities within geographical clusters, improving the reliability of inference.

**Explanation of Coefficients:** Coefficients in the estimated model reflect the direction and strength of the relationship between the independent variables and the latent propensity to support EU membership. The positive coefficients indicate that higher values of an independent variable increase support, whereas negative coefficients mean the opposite. However, coefficients from an ordinal probit model cannot be directly interpreted as marginal effects on the probability of being in a specific category. To enhance interpretability, marginal effects were calculated showing how a one-unit change in each independent variable affects the probability of being in each category of support, holding other variables constant (Williams, Richard, 2012).

**Addressing Possible Issues:** This may create endogeneity, especially with the variable KNOWi. Those individuals who have more pronounced pro-EU tendencies will seek more information; this raises their knowledge and support simultaneously. Without appropriate instrumental variables (Wooldridge, 2010), it is difficult to address the issue of endogeneity completely. Robustness checks were conducted by re-estimating models without the knowledge variable. Results remained qualitatively similar, which would suggest that endogeneity did not drastically distort the estimates. However, the interpretations remain cautious, and future research might use longitudinal or experimental designs to improve causal inference (Creswell, 2014).

Since the respondents were guaranteed to be anonymous, the presence of social desirability bias was minimized. There is also avoidance of systematically biased responses since this is a neutral wording found in the questionnaires (Tourangeau, 2007).

**Limitations:** The cross-sectional nature of the data precludes definitive causal conclusions, while non-probability sampling may limit generalizability (Bethlehem, Jelke, 2010). Potential biases in sampling and self-selection mean that the findings should be viewed as indicative of trends rather than definitive population estimates. Self-reported measures may also incorporate inaccuracies in self-assessment (Podsakoff, 1986). These limitations are further discussed in Chapter 5, ensuring transparency in the study's methodological boundaries.

**Ethical Considerations:** Ethical standards were guaranteed throughout the research process. Data anonymization and confidentiality were ensured for all participants; data storage was secure, and access was granted only to the research team. The study followed the guidelines

on ethics set by the appropriate bodies, ensuring integrity throughout the research process (Society, 2014).

**Alignment with the Theoretical Framework and Subsequent Analysis:** The approach taken here, anchoring each variable in the Blinder & Krueger (2004) model and related literature, lays a very rigorous foundation for the empirical analysis that will be conducted in Chapter 4. Careful operationalization of constructs, thorough diagnostic testing, and recognition of possible biases ensure that the following findings are both theoretically informed and empirically sound. This alignment enhances the academic added value of the research by contributing more seriously to the general discourse of EU integration and public opinion formation within this Western Balkans context (Toshkov D. D., 2011; McLaren, 2006). In summary, this chapter provides a comprehensive and methodologically robust framework for assessing the factors shaping public opinion on EU membership in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The selected econometric techniques and theoretical underpinning provide a sound basis for a proper interpretation of the results to be exposed in the subsequent chapters and will contribute to an enhanced academic understanding of the dynamics underlying support for European integration in the region.

## **4. Findings**

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the research into public attitudes toward European Union membership among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. Drawing on the political economy, social identity theory, political psychology, and interaction between mass publics and political elites outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, the analysis investigates the role of economic expectations, political ideology, political trust, cultural identity, national sovereignty, and knowledge of EU policies.

The chapter begins with detailed descriptive statistics on demographic characteristics of respondents and their general attitudes toward EU membership. Following the recommendations, we have streamlined some of the demographic discussions and focused on aspects of most relevance to the hypotheses, adding external sources where possible to validate the findings in a broader context. The chapter then goes ahead to present full statistical analyses of correlation, cross-tabulations, and regression models in testing the four hypotheses in Chapter 1. These descriptive and inferential statistics combined will help gain a deeper understanding of the complex factors influencing public opinion on EU integration among Albanians in the Western Balkans. These findings will be interpreted in the light of the theoretical perspectives discussed above to provide an all-rounded comprehension of factors

that determine attitudes toward EU membership. This chapter also discusses some regional variation and implications that may arise for policymakers and stakeholders engaged in the process of integrating the EU. Overall, this chapter contributes to the broad discourse of EU enlargement and public opinion in candidate countries through providing insight that could well inform both academic research and policymaking.

## 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

This section provides an in-depth analysis of the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents, including region, age, gender, education level, employment status, and location. By examining these variables, we aim to understand the composition of the sample and identify potential factors that may influence attitudes toward EU membership. We emphasize significant patterns that are closely related to the hypotheses in order to maintain the Blinder and Krueger (2004) model's emphasis on demographic, ideological, and knowledge-based elements. We concentrate on characteristics that potentially influence opinions on EU integration, such as age, education, or regional distribution, rather than going into great depth about every demographic aspect.

*Table 4.1: Respondents by Region*

| Region          | Number of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Albania         | 162                   | 32.08%         |
| North Macedonia | 154                   | 30.50%         |
| Kosovo          | 189                   | 37.43%         |
| Total           | 505                   | 100%           |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Breakdown of survey respondents by Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, including percentages.*

The sample distribution includes Albania (32.08%), North Macedonia (30.50%), and Kosovo (37.43%). This distribution, considering the applied sampling approach, is sufficient to represent every regional context for comparative analysis. The model by Blinder & Krueger explains regional variations in perceived economic benefits, political trust, and cultural identity concerns. A slightly higher share of Kosovo increases, given its political standing, the relevance of self-interest and institutional trust for the expression of pro-EU attitudes.

Regional Context and Historical Background: In the light of EU integration, Albania has held candidate status since 2014, North Macedonia initiated accession talks after resolving the naming dispute, while Kosovo is still in the process of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (Commission, Enlargement Package 2020, 2020u). Overall, these contextual elements correspond with theoretical expectations that political environments and trust asymmetries influence EU attitudes, aligning with the model's emphasis on political trust, ideological, and knowledge-based orientation as mediators of public opinion (Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005; McLaren, 2006).

*Table 4.2: Age Distribution*

| <b>Age Group</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Under 18         | 5              | 4                      | 5             | 14           | 2.77%                 |
| 18-24            | 40             | 35                     | 45            | 120          | 23.76%                |
| 25-34            | 55             | 50                     | 60            | 165          | 32.67%                |
| 35-44            | 30             | 32                     | 35            | 97           | 19.21%                |
| 45-54            | 20             | 22                     | 25            | 67           | 13.27%                |
| 55-64            | 7              | 7                      | 12            | 26           | 5.15%                 |
| 65 or older      | 5              | 4                      | 7             | 16           | 3.17%                 |
| Total            | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Age groups of survey respondents segmented by region, total counts, and percentages*

The majority (75.64%) of respondents are between 18 and 44 years old, a cohort more likely engaged in the labor market and exposed to economic information. Younger respondents often demonstrate more liberal orientations and are more receptive to international integration (Inglehart R. &, 2016; Inglehart R. , 1997). This demographic skew may, therefore, overstate the positive economic expectations (H1) and the liberal-leaning ideological dispositions (H2) in the data. Underrepresentation of older age groups reduces the breadth of perspectives on cultural identity or sovereignty concerns associated with such older generations. This sampling caveat needs to be considered when generalizing results, as older respondents might hold more conservative views that are less captured in this dataset.

*Table 4.3: Gender Distribution*

| <b>Gender</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|---------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Male          | 90             | 85                     | 105           | 280          | 55.45%                |
| Female        | 72             | 69                     | 84            | 225          | 44.55%                |
| Other         | 0              | 0                      | 0             | 0            | 0.00%                 |
| Total         | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Gender composition of respondents with a breakdown of male, female, and other categories.*

A slightly male-dominated sample (55.45% male, 44.55% female) could reflect cultural norms or differential survey participation. Literature suggests that men and women may differ in political interest or exposure to policy discussions (Norris, 2000). Although not central to the hypotheses, these gender differences may subtly influence observed relationships, such as economic expectations or support for specific EU policies.

*Table 4.4: Education Level*

| <b>Education Level</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|------------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Primary Education      | 15             | 12                     | 15            | 42           | 8.32%                 |
| Secondary Education    | 70             | 65                     | 80            | 215          | 42.57%                |
| Bachelor's Degree      | 55             | 55                     | 65            | 175          | 34.65%                |
| Master's Degree        | 18             | 20                     | 20            | 58           | 11.49%                |
| Doctorate or Higher    | 4              | 2                      | 9             | 15           | 2.97%                 |
| Total                  | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Distribution of respondents by their highest attained education level across regions.*

The sample is relatively well-educated, with 42.57% holding secondary education and 34.65% holding bachelor's degrees. Higher education correlates with greater political awareness, openness, and informed decision-making (Gabel, 1998; Hakhverdian, 2013), potentially reinforcing higher knowledge levels (H3) and shaping more pro-European attitudes that align with liberal and cosmopolitan values.

*Table 4.5: Employment Status*

| <b>Employment Status</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|--------------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Employed Full-Time       | 110            | 100                    | 120           | 330          | 65.35%                |
| Employed Part-Time       | 15             | 12                     | 20            | 47           | 9.31%                 |
| Self-Employed            | 10             | 8                      | 12            | 30           | 5.94%                 |
| Unemployed               | 12             | 10                     | 14            | 36           | 7.13%                 |
| Student                  | 10             | 12                     | 10            | 32           | 6.34%                 |
| Retired                  | 3              | 4                      | 5             | 12           | 2.38%                 |
| Other                    | 2              | 3                      | 8             | 13           | 2.57%                 |
| Total                    | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Employment categories of respondents, such as full-time, part-time, and unemployed.*

A majority (65.35%) are employed full-time, indicative of a working-age, economically active population. Given that economic conditions (employment opportunities, wages, industry competitiveness) can strongly influence public opinion, this demographic profile supports H1's focus on economic expectations. Employed individuals may directly link EU membership to tangible economic gains or losses (Blinder, 2004).

*Table 4.6: Location of Respondents*

| <b>Location</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Urban Area      | 130            | 115                    | 135           | 380          | 75.25%                |
| Rural Area      | 32             | 39                     | 54            | 125          | 24.75%                |
| Total           | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Respondents' locations categorized into urban and rural areas across regions.*

With 75.25% from urban areas, the sample leans toward respondents with better internet access, more diverse media exposure, and potentially more liberal and internationally oriented views (Verhaegen, S., Hooghe, M., & Quintelier, E., 2017). Compared to rural residents, residents in urban areas may have broader access to information that influences their

knowledge about the EU (H3) and trust in institutions (H4). Similarly, the combination of urbanization and education can increase pro-EU orientations, as suggested by modernization theories, which link modernization to more positive attitudes toward supranational integration (Marks G. , 2001). This profile of younger, relatively well-educated, predominantly urban respondents may be peculiarly inclined to more liberal and pro-EU attitudes. Any interpretation of the findings will have to bear this demographic skew in mind. Further research using stratified sampling or multiple methods of data collection would obtain a more representative sample.

#### 4.1.1 Public Support for EU Membership

Respondents were asked about their overall support for their country joining the EU. The results are presented in Table 4.7.

*Table 4.7: Support for Joining the EU*

| <b>Response</b>  | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Strongly Support | 100            | 90                     | 120           | 310          | 61.39%                |
| Support          | 45             | 50                     | 55            | 150          | 29.70%                |
| Neutral          | 10             | 8                      | 5             | 23           | 4.55%                 |
| Oppose           | 5              | 4                      | 5             | 14           | 2.77%                 |
| Strongly Oppose  | 2              | 2                      | 4             | 8            | 1.58%                 |
| Total            | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Levels of support for EU membership segmented by region and response types.*

An overwhelming 91.09% support EU membership (either strongly or somewhat). This high support aligns with other regional surveys (e.g., (Commission, Enlargement Package 2020, 2020u) and suggests a pronounced pro-EU sentiment. Given the demographic profile, these findings may partially reflect self-interest (H1), as many respondents anticipate economic advantages, and liberal ideological leanings (H2) that embrace European values and democratic norms.

While strong across all regions, Kosovo exhibits the highest strong support rate (~63.49%), possibly due to its quest for international recognition and the perceived stability offered by

EU integration (Bieber, 2011). Albania's similar enthusiasm underscores entrenched pro-European orientations, while North Macedonia's slightly lower strong support (58.44%) could reflect identity-based reservations related to sovereignty (H2) and the legacy of the naming dispute (Vangeli, 2011).

Noting potential social desirability bias, future studies might employ indirect questioning techniques (Glynn, 2013) or compare survey responses with behavioral indicators. Such efforts would refine our understanding of genuine support levels and confirm whether these high rates align with voting patterns or participation in EU-funded programs.

#### 4.1.2 Economic Expectations

Economic expectations related to EU membership were assessed through questions evaluating respondents' beliefs about the impact on their country's economy and job opportunities.

**Impact on the Country's Economy:** Respondents were asked how they believe EU membership will impact their country's economy.

*Table 4.8: Economic Impact of EU Membership*

| <b>Response</b>           | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|---------------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Significant Improvement   | 90             | 80                     | 110           | 280          | 55.45%                |
| Improvement               | 55             | 60                     | 70            | 185          | 36.63%                |
| No Change                 | 10             | 10                     | 5             | 25           | 4.95%                 |
| Deterioration             | 4              | 3                      | 3             | 10           | 1.98%                 |
| Significant Deterioration | 3              | 1                      | 1             | 5            | 0.99%                 |
| Total                     | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Expectations regarding the economic improvements or deterioration due to EU membership.*

Results have shown that fully 92.08% consider that EU membership would either improve or significantly improve economic conditions in their home country. This substantial optimism indicates that a large share of the population anticipates enhanced economic development, increased foreign investment, broader market access, and improved infrastructure resulting from EU accession (Toshkov D. D., 2011).

Such perspectives thus align with the political economy and rationality frameworks discussed within Chapter 2, whereby people evaluate EU membership mainly from the point of view of expected economic benefits (Blinder, 2004; Palmer R. R., 1995). As confirmed by Hypothesis 1, positive economic expectations have been an important driver of public support for European integration, reflecting the model's emphasis on self-interest and perceived welfare gains. While optimism is generally uniformly high across all regions, there are clear differences. The highest percentage in Kosovo, at 58.20%, is likely due to the country's dire economic conditions and the hope that EU membership might stimulate development. In contrast, North Macedonia's figure of 51.95% may reflect a more cautious outlook, shaped by earlier economic reforms and a slower integration process.

*Figure 1.2: Medium-Term Economic Projections for the Western Balkan Economies (2021–26)*

Western Balkans outlook, 2021–26

|                                                           | 2021  | 2022  | 2023* | 2024' | 2025' | 2026' |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| <b>Real GDP growth (percent)</b>                          |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Albania                                                   | 8.9   | 4.9   | 3.4   | 3.3   | 3.4   | 3.4   |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina                                    | 7.4   | 4.2   | 1.7   | 2.8   | 3.2   | 3.9   |
| Kosovo                                                    | 10.7  | 4.3   | 3.3   | 3.8   | 3.9   | 4     |
| North Macedonia                                           | 4.5   | 2.2   | 1     | 1.8   | 2.5   | 3     |
| Montenegro                                                | 13    | 6.4   | 6.3   | 3.4   | 3.5   | 3.2   |
| Serbia                                                    | 7.7   | 2.5   | 2.5   | 3.8   | 4.2   | 4     |
| WB6                                                       | 7.9   | 3.4   | 2.6   | 3.3   | 3.7   | 3.7   |
| <b>Real GDP components growth (percent)</b>               |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Consumption                                               | 4.8   | 3     | 1     | 3.2   | 2.9   | 3.1   |
| Investment                                                | 2.2   | 1.3   | -0.8  | 2.2   | 1.6   | 1.2   |
| Net exports                                               | -0.4  | -1.6  | 2.1   | -2.1  | -0.8  | -0.5  |
| Exports                                                   | 9.9   | 6.6   | 1.6   | 2.4   | 3.3   | 3.2   |
| Imports (-)                                               | 10.3  | 8.2   | -0.5  | 4.5   | 4.1   | 3.7   |
| <b>Consumer price inflation</b> (percent, period average) | 3.2   | 11.8  | 9     | 3.4   | 2.6   | 2.3   |
| <b>External sector (percent of GDP)</b>                   |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Goods exports                                             | 25.2  | 28.5  | 25.6  | 24.9  | 25    | 25.2  |
| Trade balance                                             | -16.7 | -18.7 | -14.3 | -14.9 | -15   | -14.8 |
| Current account balance                                   | -5.7  | -7.7  | -4.1  | -5.6  | -5.9  | -5.8  |
| Foreign direct investment                                 | 5.9   | 6.9   | 5.3   | 5.3   | 5.2   | 5.2   |
| External debt                                             | 83.1  | 75.3  | 70.7  | 70.2  | 69.3  | 69.3  |
| <b>Public sector (percent of GDP)</b>                     |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Public revenues                                           | 35.9  | 34.8  | 36.4  | 37.1  | 36.8  | 36.9  |
| Public expenditures                                       | 38.8  | 37.5  | 37.8  | 39.6  | 39.2  | 39.1  |
| Fiscal balance                                            | -3    | -2.7  | -1.5  | -2.5  | -2.5  | -2.3  |
| Public and publicly guaranteed debt                       | 56.5  | 50.4  | 46.8  | 47.2  | 46.9  | 46.8  |

*Source: Adapted from World Bank (2023), “Western Balkans Economic Overview.”*

These regional differences underline the importance of local socio-economic contexts in interpreting public attitudes toward EU membership. Expectations are influenced not only by

broad economic aspirations but also by each region's unique conditions and historical experiences.

Moreover, the high level of economic optimism highlights the role of utilitarian calculations in shaping support for EU integration. According to the Blinder & Krueger (2004) model, individuals form opinions based on perceptions of economic self-interest and personal welfare. This rational evaluation underlies the strong positive correlation between favorable economic prospects and support for EU membership evident in the survey data.

**Job Opportunities:** Respondents were also asked whether they think EU membership will bring more job opportunities to their country.

*Table 4.9: Job Opportunities with EU Membership*

| <b>Response</b>   | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Strongly Agree    | 95             | 85                     | 120           | 300          | 59.41%                |
| Agree             | 50             | 55                     | 60            | 165          | 32.67%                |
| Neutral           | 10             | 10                     | 5             | 25           | 4.95%                 |
| Disagree          | 5              | 3                      | 3             | 11           | 2.18%                 |
| Strongly Disagree | 2              | 1                      | 1             | 4            | 0.79%                 |
| Total             | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Beliefs about the increase in job opportunities with EU membership.*

This high percentage, 92% as a matter of fact, would agree that EU membership could provide more job opportunities a result of strong endorsement. These results are strongly related to high unemployment rates, especially among youth, in the Western Balkans. By combining EU integration with personal, improved employment prospects, the respondent reinforces overall support for accession, emphasizing the tangible perceived economic benefits of membership.

This corresponds to the utilitarian view that economic self-interest is a critical shaper of public attitudes (Toshkov D. D., 2011; Commission, Enlargement Package 2020, 2020u). More concretely, EU membership associated with labor mobility and access to broader markets resonates particularly with the young and better educated who are seeking better career prospects abroad (Recchi, 2009). While increased labor mobility promises greater

opportunities, it also raises concerns about potential brain drain and the outflow of skilled labor from home countries. The challenges require targeted policies in order to retain talent and ensure that benefits accruing from integration do not disadvantage domestic labor markets.

These dynamics underline the complex interplay between individual aspirations, national economic stability, and the broader implications of EU membership. Policymakers will need to anticipate and mitigate such unintended consequences if they are to maintain popular support and sustain the positive economic narrative associated with EU integration.

**Main Economic Concerns:** Despite the overall optimism, respondents were asked about their main concerns regarding the economic impact of EU membership.

*Table 4.10: Economic Concerns Regarding EU Membership*

| <b>Concern</b>                            | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Increased Competition from EU Companies   | 50             | 45                     | 60            | 155          | 30.69%                |
| Loss of National Economic Control         | 20             | 18                     | 25            | 63           | 12.48%                |
| Unequal Distribution of Economic Benefits | 35             | 30                     | 40            | 105          | 20.79%                |
| Higher Costs of Living                    | 25             | 22                     | 30            | 77           | 15.25%                |
| No Concerns                               | 32             | 39                     | 34            | 105          | 20.79%                |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>162</b>     | <b>154</b>             | <b>189</b>    | <b>505</b>   | <b>100%</b>           |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Concerns about competition, cost of living, and other economic factors tied to EU integration.*

While a notable proportion of respondents (20.79%) indicated that they have no economic concerns regarding EU membership, others expressed specific apprehensions:

- Increased Competition from EU Companies was the most cited concern (30.69%), reflecting fears that local businesses may struggle to compete with established EU firms.
- Unequal Distribution of Economic Benefits was identified by 20.79% of respondents, highlighting worries that the gains from EU membership might not be shared equitably among all citizens or regions.
- Higher Costs of Living (15.25%) and Loss of National Economic Control (12.48%) were also significant concerns.

These concerns reflect a more nuanced approach to EU integration, where perceived gains are juxtaposed with potential losses. SMEs would most likely face increased competition, and policymakers should consider measures to enhance competitiveness through improved financing opportunities, technology transfers, and capacity-building programs. These efforts should aim to make domestic industries more capable and competitive within an integrated European market.

Addressing issues of asymmetric benefit distribution requires promoting inclusive growth and equitable access to emerging opportunities (Commission, Enlargement Package 2020, 2020u). This can be achieved through regional development programs, targeted support for disadvantaged communities, and transparent mechanisms to ensure broader participation in the benefits of integration. Similarly, maintaining transparency regarding inflation control and safeguarding sovereignty can help mitigate fears of rising living costs and loss of economic independence.

**Impact of Adopting the Euro:** Respondents were asked about their views on adopting the euro as their country's currency.

*Table 4.11: Impact of Adopting the Euro on Personal Finances*

| <b>Response</b>   | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Strongly Agree    | 80             | 70                     | 95            | 245          | 48.51%                |
| Agree             | 60             | 55                     | 70            | 185          | 36.63%                |
| Neutral           | 15             | 20                     | 15            | 50           | 9.90%                 |
| Disagree          | 5              | 5                      | 5             | 15           | 2.97%                 |
| Strongly Disagree | 2              | 4                      | 4             | 10           | 1.98%                 |

| Response | Albania | North Macedonia | Kosovo | Total | Percentage (%) |
|----------|---------|-----------------|--------|-------|----------------|
| Total    | 162     | 154             | 189    | 505   | 100%           |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Views on the effects of adopting the euro on personal finances across regions.*

A full 85.14% of the survey population believes that adopting the euro would positively impact their personal financial situations. This optimism arises from expectations of currency stability, reduced exchange rate risks, and the ease of cross-border transactions (Lane, 2006). Kosovo, which already uses the euro unilaterally, perceives its formal adoption under EU auspices as a stable continuation (Hashi, 2013). Albania and North Macedonia, however, may present a broader range of views influenced by concerns over monetary sovereignty and economic autonomy.

Despite overall optimism, a minority are neutral or disagree about the benefits of adopting the euro:

- Concerns about the loss of national monetary control may underpin some skepticism. Transferring monetary policy to the European Central Bank might be seen as losing a measure of economic sovereignty (Featherstone, 2001).
- Fears about price increases associated with the currency changeover are also common. Historical experiences in other countries indicate that switching to the euro can raise public concerns about inflation and upward changes in prices (Ehrmann, 2006).

These concerns could be addressed if policymakers establish clear and transparent communication strategies about how the transition will be managed, along with the anticipated benefits. Transparency concerning anti-inflationary measures and consumer protection policies during the changeover process will be crucial in building public trust. Engaging various stakeholder groups, including businesses and consumers, can facilitate a smooth transition and alleviate concerns.

Additionally, educational campaigns on the success stories of other countries that have adopted the euro can reinforce positive perceptions. Sharing best practices and lessons learned from previous transitions will help develop effective strategies tailored to national contexts.

#### 4.1.3 Political Ideology

Political orientation was assessed to understand its influence on support for EU membership. Understanding the political ideology of respondents provides insight into how individual beliefs and values may shape attitudes toward European integration.

*Table 4.12: Political Orientation*

| <b>Orientation</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|--------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Very Liberal       | 60             | 50                     | 70            | 180          | 35.64%                |
| Liberal            | 60             | 60                     | 70            | 190          | 37.62%                |
| Centrist           | 25             | 30                     | 30            | 85           | 16.83%                |
| Conservative       | 10             | 10                     | 15            | 35           | 6.93%                 |
| Very Conservative  | 5              | 2                      | 4             | 11           | 2.18%                 |
| Other              | 2              | 2                      | 0             | 4            | 0.79%                 |
| Total              | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Distribution of political orientations such as liberal, centrist, and conservative.*

The majority of respondents identify as "Very Liberal" or "Liberal" (73.26%), indicating a predominantly progressive political orientation within the sample. This finding aligns with the demographic background of respondents, who come from younger, urban, and relatively better-educated groups—traits typically associated with receptivity to liberal values and openness to change (Inglehart R. &, 2016).

Analyzing the intersection of political ideology with factors such as age, education, and location provides valuable context for understanding these attitudes:

- **Age:** Younger respondents are more likely to identify as liberal. This aligns with the concept of generational replacement, where successive cohorts are socialized into different, more progressive values (Inglehart R. , 1997).
- **Education:** Individuals with higher levels of education tend to exhibit more liberal orientations. Higher education often exposes individuals to diverse perspectives and encourages critical thinking, fostering liberal attitudes (Hakhverdian, 2013).
- **Location:** Urban residents are more progressive compared to their rural counterparts. Urban settings offer exposure to greater diversity and cosmopolitan influences, promoting more progressive political views (Florida, 2002).

This correspondence between demographic characteristics and political ideology underscores the importance of these variables in interpreting public attitudes toward EU membership. Liberal individuals are more likely to support EU integration due to shared values such as democracy, human rights, and international cooperation. Conversely, conservative individuals may prioritize national sovereignty and traditional values, potentially leading to greater skepticism toward supranational entities like the EU (Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005).

**Support for EU Policies:** To assess the influence of political ideology on support for EU membership, respondents were asked about their general support for the EU's policies and direction.

*Table 4.13: Support for EU Policies*

| <b>Response</b>   | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Strongly Agree    | 90             | 80                     | 100           | 270          | 53.47%                |
| Agree             | 60             | 60                     | 70            | 190          | 37.62%                |
| Neutral           | 10             | 10                     | 10            | 30           | 5.94%                 |
| Disagree          | 2              | 3                      | 5             | 10           | 1.98%                 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0              | 1                      | 4             | 5            | 0.99%                 |
| Total             | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Levels of agreement with EU policies and direction.*

Correspondingly, 91.09% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with the political course of the EU. Such alignment could be explained by the generally liberal orientation of the sample, which resonates with the EU's agenda addressing aspirations for democratic governance, social justice, and sustainable development (Šabić S. Š., 2018; Commission, Standard Eurobarometer 91, 2019). The benefits clearly extend beyond economics: anti-corruption measures, environmental standards, and educational reforms appeal to informed, progressive audiences.

However, not all policies are equally popular, and those perceived as promoting permissive values or eroding national sovereignty may elicit skepticism from conservative respondents (Hooghe, 2007). These dissenting voices should be acknowledged and respected.

Policymakers must engage with diverse perspectives, ensuring that dialogues are inclusive

and considerate of cultural sensitivities and sovereignty concerns while effectively communicating the tangible benefits of integration.

Even though general support is high, a minority expressing neutrality or disagreement warrants attention. They may distrust EU bureaucracy, fear a loss of local control, or find specific policy areas unsatisfactory (Eichenberg, 2007). Addressing these concerns through transparent governance, responsive policymaking, and effective communication strategies can help build trust and foster broader, more sustainable support for EU integration.

#### 4.1.4 Political Trust

Political trust was assessed to understand its influence on support for EU membership.

*Table 4.14: Trust in National Government*

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Very High Trust | 30             | 25                     | 35            | 90           | 17.82%                |
| High Trust      | 55             | 50                     | 60            | 165          | 32.67%                |
| Moderate Trust  | 50             | 55                     | 65            | 170          | 33.66%                |
| Low Trust       | 20             | 18                     | 20            | 58           | 11.49%                |
| Very Low Trust  | 7              | 6                      | 9             | 22           | 4.36%                 |
| Total           | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Respondents' trust levels in their national governments across regions.*

*Table 4.15: Trust in EU Institutions*

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Very High Trust | 80             | 75                     | 90            | 245          | 48.51%                |
| High Trust      | 55             | 60                     | 70            | 185          | 36.63%                |
| Moderate Trust  | 20             | 15                     | 20            | 55           | 10.89%                |
| Low Trust       | 5              | 3                      | 5             | 13           | 2.57%                 |
| Very Low Trust  | 2              | 1                      | 4             | 7            | 1.39%                 |
| Total           | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Trust in EU institutions compared to national governments.*

The results showed that 85.15% of the respondents have a high or very high level of trust in EU institutions, while trust in national governments is much lower, with only 50.49% expressing similar confidence. This large discrepancy indicates that respondents perceive the EU as more trustworthy, effective, and rule-bound, while their respective national governments are often associated with experiences of corruption, political instability, and inefficient governance at the domestic level. When domestic institutions fail to meet citizens' expectations, supranational entities like the EU may emerge as more trustworthy alternatives, offering substantially stronger safeguards and higher governance standards (Schimmelfennig, 2005).

Indeed, lower trust in national governments in these countries is rooted in historical patterns of weak rule of law, patronage, and mismanagement, which have undermined public confidence. This observation aligns with the domestic proxies theory, which posits that low trust in domestic institutions drives individuals to seek solutions at a supranational level. Consequently, citizens may support EU membership as it is perceived to introduce institutional reforms and enhance accountability. These findings also directly support Hypothesis 4, which posits that higher political trust in supranational institutions correlates with increased support for EU integration. By incorporating insights from the Blinder & Krueger (2004) framework, we observe how institutional and informational trust mechanisms interact with dimensions such as ideology and knowledge to shape attitudes.

High trust in the EU carries critical implications for the integration process. It facilitates public willingness to accept reforms and policy harmonizations required for accession, leading citizens to view such efforts as aligned with their aspirations for good governance. Research demonstrates that trust encourages compliance with EU rules and standards, easing the accession process (Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005; Schimmelfennig, 2005). Conversely, persistently low trust in national governments may hinder progress, highlighting the need for domestic political elites to enhance transparency, strengthen judicial independence, and implement anti-corruption measures (Grabbe, 2006). Rebuilding trust at the national level, coupled with engagement at the EU level, is essential to ensuring the credibility and sustainability of the integration process in the long term.

#### 4.1.5 Cultural Identity and National Sovereignty

To assess concerns regarding cultural identity and national sovereignty, respondents were asked about the importance of preserving national identity and their concerns about cultural harm due to EU membership.

*Table 4.16: Concerns About Cultural Identity*

| <b>Response</b>      | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|----------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Very Concerned       | 10             | 12                     | 10            | 32           | 6.34%                 |
| Concerned            | 20             | 18                     | 25            | 63           | 12.48%                |
| Neutral              | 30             | 35                     | 30            | 95           | 18.81%                |
| Not Concerned        | 55             | 55                     | 60            | 170          | 33.66%                |
| Not Concerned at All | 47             | 34                     | 64            | 145          | 28.71%                |
| Total                | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Levels of concern regarding cultural harm due to EU membership.*

A majority of respondents (62.37%) do not believe that EU membership would harm their country's cultural identity, indicating that cultural concerns are not a major obstacle to support for membership among most individuals. However, a significant minority (18.82%) express concerns, highlighting that cultural identity remains an important issue for some. These apprehensions may be tied to fears of cultural homogenization, the dilution of local traditions, or external pressures on linguistic, religious, and historical heritages (Risse, 2010).

*Table 4.17: Importance of Preserving National Identity*

| <b>Response</b>     | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|---------------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Extremely Important | 75             | 70                     | 85            | 230          | 45.54%                |
| Very Important      | 45             | 50                     | 55            | 150          | 29.70%                |
| Quite Important     | 20             | 20                     | 30            | 70           | 13.86%                |
| Slightly Important  | 12             | 10                     | 12            | 34           | 6.73%                 |
| Not Important       | 10             | 4                      | 7             | 21           | 4.16%                 |
| Total               | 162            | 154                    | 189           | 505          | 100%                  |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Importance placed on preserving national identity among respondents.*

Although few strongly fear cultural damage, 75.24% consider maintaining national identity to be either 'Extremely Important' or 'Very Important.' This demonstrates ambivalence: national heritage is important, but it does not prevent membership. It reflects a nuanced approach to integration, whereby one belongs both to a nation and to Europe, in line with the EU motto of 'Unity in Diversity' (Commission, European, 2020c) . Given this perspective, cultural identity concerns directly resonate with Hypothesis 2, which emphasizes that public views about integration are shaped by considerations of sovereignty and cultural identity. Within the Blinder & Krueger (2004) model, these concerns form part of the ideological and group-interest variables, which interact with economic and informational factors to shape opinions. Emphasizing cultural policies and heritage protection programs at the EU level can reassure citizens that integration does not necessitate a loss of cultural uniqueness. Initiatives such as the European Heritage Label and the European Capital of Culture, supported by the European Commission (Commission, A New European Agenda for Culture - Background Information, 2018), enhance cultural pride and mutual respect, easing public acceptance of integration. Moreover, intercultural dialogue initiatives (Verkuyten, 2005) and the principle of subsidiarity (Schütze, 2009) allow for national autonomy in culturally sensitive domains. By proactively addressing identity and sovereignty concerns, the EU can minimize cultural resistance and reinforce the compatibility between national and European identities.

#### 4.1.6 Knowledge and Awareness of EU Policies

Respondents' knowledge and awareness of EU policies were evaluated through self-assessment and objective knowledge-based questions.

*Table 4.18: Self-Assessment of EU Knowledge*

| <b>Response</b> | <b>Albania</b> | <b>North Macedonia</b> | <b>Kosovo</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-----------------|----------------|------------------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Yes             | 80             | 75                     | 90            | 245          | 48.51%                |
| Rather Yes      | 55             | 55                     | 65            | 175          | 34.65%                |
| Rather No       | 15             | 20                     | 15            | 50           | 9.90%                 |
| No              | 7              | 4                      | 10            | 21           | 4.16%                 |

| Response                   | Albania | North Macedonia | Kosovo | Total | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------|---------|-----------------|--------|-------|----------------|
| I haven't thought about it | 5       | 0               | 9      | 14    | 2.77%          |
| Total                      | 162     | 154             | 189    | 505   | 100%           |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Respondents' self-assessment of their knowledge about EU policies.*

A majority, 83.17%, perceive themselves to be well-informed about EU issues, but objective tests revealed significant information gaps. For example, only 59.41% correctly identified Germany as an EU member state, with similarly low results for knowledge concerning EU institutions (65.35% correct on the European Central Bank's primary function) and the Stabilization and Association Agreement (58.42% aware of its significance). These findings underscore the divide between perceived and factual knowledge, highlighting the necessity of verifying self-assessed understanding with factual tests (Inglehart R. , 1970; Kahneman, 2011).

This pattern aligns directly with Hypothesis 3, which posits that increased knowledge leads to greater support for EU membership. Within the Blinder & Krueger (2004) model, information and cognitive mobilization are critical for shaping policy preferences. Consequently, individuals who overestimate their understanding may hold shallow attitudes, making them more susceptible to misinformation and Euroscepticism (de Vreese, 2018; Guess, 2020). Enhancing critical thinking skills, media literacy, and factual knowledge through educational curricula, public awareness campaigns, and workshops led by civil society organizations (CSOs)—can help solidify genuinely informed support.

**Objective Knowledge Assessment:** Respondents were asked specific questions to test their knowledge about the EU.

**Question:** Which of the following countries is a member state of the European Union?

**Correct Answer:** Germany

*Table 4.19: EU Member State Knowledge*

| Response        | Correct | Albania | North Macedonia | Kosovo | Total | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|---------|---------|-----------------|--------|-------|----------------|
| Albania         | No      | 50      | 40              | 55     | 145   | 28.71%         |
| Germany         | Yes     | 90      | 100             | 110    | 300   | 59.41%         |
| North Macedonia | No      | 10      | 8               | 7      | 25    | 4.95%          |

| Response | Correct | Albania | North Macedonia | Kosovo | Total | Percentage (%) |
|----------|---------|---------|-----------------|--------|-------|----------------|
| Norway   | No      | 12      | 6               | 8      | 26    | 5.15%          |
| Total    | -       | 162     | 154             | 189    | 505   | 100%           |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Test of respondents' factual knowledge about EU member states and policies.*

*Percentage of Correct Answers: 59.41%*

Indeed, it is observed that approximately 59.41% of respondents correctly identified Germany as an EU member state, while only 65.35% accurately stated the primary function of the ECB and 58.42% recognized the SAA. These objective measures confirm significant knowledge gaps regarding fundamental EU facts and institutions. Such gaps may create unrealistic expectations or unwarranted fears, as citizens may misunderstand the requirements of EU membership or the level of policy harmonization involved. These misunderstandings have the potential to undermine stable support for integration, as noted by Van Elsuwege (2007) and Dimitrova (2010) (Van Elsuwege, 2007; Dimitrova, 2010).

Providing accurate information is crucial. According to the cognitive mobilization concept in political psychology, political engagement is contingent on awareness and knowledge (Inglehart R. , 1970). Overestimating one's knowledge results in fragile support that is more susceptible to the influence of populist narratives or anti-EU rhetoric. Strengthening critical thinking skills and providing accessible, accurate information can enable citizens to navigate the complexities of EU policies and reduce vulnerability to disinformation.

Programs aimed at enhancing critical thinking and media literacy are essential. Such competencies empower individuals to evaluate information more effectively, resist misinformation, and contribute to a well-informed electorate (Kahneman, 2011). In an era where social media accelerates the spread of unverified claims, improving media literacy is critical for maintaining informed public discourse (Guess, 2020; Newman, 2021).

The knowledge gap also indicates that public attitudes toward EU integration may not always be rooted in accurate or comprehensive information. Policymakers and educators can address this by implementing educational strategies focused on critical analysis, fact-based learning, and interactive engagement. These initiatives can bridge the gap between perceived and actual knowledge, creating a citizenry better equipped to understand the complexities of European integration. Additionally, fostering resilience against populist or Eurosceptic narratives that exploit informational deficits will promote more stable, evidence-based support for EU membership (de Vreese, 2018; EACEA (Education, 2018).

### Impact of EU Knowledge on Support:

*Table 4.20: Impact of EU Knowledge on Support*

| Response          | Albania | North Macedonia | Kosovo | Total | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|---------|-----------------|--------|-------|----------------|
| Strongly Agree    | 95      | 90              | 110    | 295   | 58.42%         |
| Agree             | 50      | 45              | 60     | 155   | 30.69%         |
| Neutral           | 10      | 12              | 10     | 32    | 6.34%          |
| Disagree          | 5       | 5               | 5      | 15    | 2.97%          |
| Strongly Disagree | 2       | 2               | 4      | 8     | 1.58%          |
| Total             | 162     | 154             | 189    | 505   | 100%           |

*Source: Survey Data*

*Note: Analysis of how knowledge about the EU influences support for membership.*

The overwhelming majority of respondents, 89.11%, believe that the more one knows about the EU, the more favorable people are toward membership, strongly supporting Hypothesis 3. This underscores the vital role of information dissemination and education in shaping public perceptions, consistent with the cognitive mobilization and knowledge-based dimensions identified by Blinder & Krueger (2004). Increasing public understanding of the European Union involves fostering transparent communication, providing accessible educational materials, and facilitating dialogue-based forums. Such efforts are critical in building broad popular support for integration initiatives.

The high percentage of respondents recognizing the link between knowledge and support highlights the effectiveness of well-structured informational campaigns and educational initiatives as policymaking tools. Delivering comprehensive and audience-sensitive information about the EU's benefits, policies, and accession processes can enhance fact-based understanding and dismantle misconceptions. Surveys and assessments can identify specific knowledge gaps, enabling policymakers to address these gaps through targeted strategies and educational programs (European Commission, 2021 p; Commission, European, 2020).

It is important to understand the sources from which public knowledge of the EU is derived: traditional media, social media, educational institutions, and interpersonal networks. Recent research has demonstrated that social media play an increasingly significant role in political information uptake, particularly among younger demographics (Newman, 2021). Identifying

and leveraging the most impactful sources for different groups can enhance message resonance and help close existing knowledge gaps.

The survey highlighted particular areas of misunderstanding, especially regarding EU institutions and agreements. Addressing these gaps with factually accurate, transparent, and context-sensitive communication can help eliminate misconceptions and provide citizens with a deeper understanding of how the EU functions (Van Elsuwege, 2007). As citizens become more knowledgeable, they are better equipped to participate in democratic processes, evaluate policy trade-offs, and hold leaders accountable for integration-related decisions (Verba, 1995; Dalton, 2008).

To bridge the gap between perceived and actual knowledge, several policy recommendations can be proposed:

- **Integrate Comprehensive EU Studies into Education Curricula:** Introducing foundational EU studies in secondary and tertiary education would provide younger generations with knowledge about the EU's history, institutions, policies, and benefits. Educational programs could include interactive modules, exchange initiatives, and collaborations with EU institutions to make learning engaging (EACEA (Education, 2018).
- **Launch Multimedia Public Awareness Campaigns:** Highlighting tangible benefits such as economic growth, infrastructure development, and political stability through multimedia campaigns can maximize engagement across different audience segments. Leveraging diverse platforms, including social media, can broaden reach and stimulate public discourse (Commission, European, 2020).
- **Facilitate Community Workshops and Seminars:** Local initiatives led by experts can provide in-depth, interactive opportunities to address specific concerns and misconceptions. These workshops and seminars can build trust, foster open dialogue, and make EU topics more accessible to the general public (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung., 2019).
- **Develop Specialized Courses and Exchange Programs:** Partnerships with educational institutions to develop specialized courses and certification programs focused on EU integration can promote academic research and deepen public understanding. Scholarship programs and academic exchanges, such as Erasmus+, can provide

firsthand experiences of the EU, enriching individual perspectives (European Commission, 2021 p).

Civil society organizations (CSOs) stand out as very important agents for public information and education about the European Union. CSOs are integral in bridging information gaps. Their trusted networks and cultural sensitivity allow them to reach marginalized or underrepresented groups, making sure that informational campaigns are accurate, inclusive, and responsive to local contexts (Greenwood, 2019). Collaboration with CSOs may serve to enhance the legitimacy and credibility of communication efforts and ensure a broad spectrum of viewpoints.

Greater knowledge of the EU underpins support for membership and democratic participation. A more informed electorate is one that is more likely to engage in political discourse, participate in elections, and hold leaders accountable for decisions affecting the EU (Verba, 1995; Dalton, 2008). Investments in public education and awareness initiatives thereby foster a more cohesive and resilient society that is better placed to embrace both the opportunities and challenges associated with EU integration.

Apart from general support for membership in the EU, familiarity with specific EU policies can influence preferences for integration on particular dimensions. The attitudes of agricultural stakeholders are shaped by familiarity with the Common Agricultural Policy, environmental regulations influence ecologically conscious citizens, and familiarity with the Schengen Agreement affects those concerned about migration and border security (Van der Eijk, 2004). Tailoring communications to emphasize relevant policies for different industries and demographic groups adds nuance and constructiveness to the public debate.

Finally, the results indicate that knowledge and awareness are crucial in gaining public support for EU membership. Addressing knowledge gaps through targeted education, strategic communication, and inclusive outreach by policymakers and educators can create an increasingly informed, active, and supportive electorate. This approach aligns with democratic principles, strengthens resilience against populist challenges, and ensures that EU integration efforts resonate with a well-informed and empowered citizenry.

## 4.2 Econometric Analysis

This section presents the full econometric analysis of the determinants of public support for EU membership among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. The following analysis, based on the descriptive statistics and preliminary findings presented in the previous sections, uses a robust econometric framework closely aligned with the theoretical

perspectives developed in earlier chapters. The research seeks to uncover the underlying drivers of attitudes toward EU integration by quantifying relationships between support for EU membership and key predictors such as economic expectations, cultural concerns, political trust, knowledge levels, and political ideology, while controlling for demographic factors. This approach not only enhances academic understanding of opinion formation in the Western Balkans but also provides actionable insights for policymakers, stakeholders, and scholars aiming to foster informed and stable support for EU enlargement.

#### 4.2.1 Model Framework and Hypotheses

This model's theoretical foundation integrates several established frameworks that collectively explain how citizens form opinions on EU membership. The political economy perspective suggests that individuals assess EU accession based on anticipated economic gains or losses (Gabel, 1998; Palmer R. R., 1995). Within the Blinder & Krueger (2004) model where self-interest, ideology, and information are central dimensions—economic expectations (ECONi) correspond directly to self-interest. When individuals foresee personal and national economic gains, such as increased employment opportunities, enhanced market access, and foreign investment, they are more inclined to favor EU membership.

- H1 (Economic Expectations): The larger the extent of economic expectations from EU accession, the more positive public support becomes. This hypothesis reflects the idea that individuals driven by economic self-interest are likely to back growth-enhancing policies that promise stability and improvements in living standards through integration. Empirically confirming this hypothesis would imply that clear, evidence-based communication of expected economic benefits supported by actual data on trade flows, foreign direct investment (FDI), and structural funds can effectively bolster public support for EU accession.

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979; McLaren, 2006) posits that strong national identities can generate skepticism toward supranational entities like the EU. People's enthusiasm for integration may be balanced by their fears about cultural uniformity, the loss of language or religious traditions, and diminished national sovereignty. Cultural concerns (CULTi), capturing identity-related apprehensions, highlight how group attachments and perceived threats to cultural distinctiveness influence support.

- H2 (Cultural Concerns): Greater cultural anxieties negatively affect support for EU membership. If individuals perceive that joining the EU undermines their cultural

heritage or autonomy, they are less likely to favor integration, even when economic or political benefits are evident. For policymakers, this underscores the importance of highlighting EU policies that protect cultural diversity, promote linguistic pluralism, and support minority rights, thereby countering the perception that Europeanization leads to cultural erosion.

Cognitive mobilization theory (Inglehart R. , 1970) emphasizes that informed citizens, armed with adequate political knowledge and understanding, can better navigate complex policy issues. Information is essential for forming solid, well-founded beliefs, claim Blinder & Krueger (2004). Therefore, having knowledge (KNOWi) about the EU should promote more positive attitudes since people will be able to recognize the complexity of EU institutions, laws, and programs and discern real benefits from propaganda or misconceptions.

- H3 (Knowledge Levels): Greater knowledge and awareness of the EU lead to stronger support for membership. Informed citizens are less vulnerable to Eurosceptic narratives and are more willing to accept the nuanced benefits and responsibilities associated with membership. This highlights the importance of improving media literacy, incorporating EU studies into educational curricula, and organizing informational events or seminars that provide factually accurate and accessible insights into EU structures and benefits.

Domestic proxies theory (Citrin J. &, 2004; Trenz, 2019) stresses that political trust can shift preferences toward supranational institutions, especially when domestic governance is perceived as deficient. Citizens may perceive EU-level governance as a more credible option in the context of EU integration if national institutions are perceived as dishonest, ineffective, or unresponsive. According to the Blinder & Krueger model, trust influences how self-interest and knowledge are processed, which may enhance favorable impressions of integration.

- H4 (Political Trust): Greater trust in EU institutions is linked to stronger support for EU membership. Citizens who view the EU as providing superior governance standards, greater accountability, and more credible policy frameworks may be inclined toward integration, especially if they seek to escape domestic political instability or corruption. For national governments, visible institutional reforms, anti-corruption measures, and transparent policymaking can foster trust, thereby strengthening pro-EU sentiments.

Although political ideology (IDEOi) is not formally hypothesized, it interacts with the key constructs. Liberal orientations typically emphasize values like openness, equality, human rights, and environmental protection, which are strongly aligned with EU norms and policies.

Consequently, liberal respondents may naturally favor EU membership as it reflects their ideological views. This highlights the importance of tailoring EU messaging to domestic ideological debates, particularly by emphasizing how integration promotes social justice, environmental sustainability, and human rights protections, to build alliances with liberal and progressive groups.

The control variables—age, gender, education, employment, and urban/rural residency—are included to ensure that the primary relationships are not distorted by demographic factors. Age, for instance, can influence openness to change, with younger individuals often being more receptive to international cooperation. Education enhances cognitive skills and familiarity with EU institutions, while employment status and residency patterns may shape individuals' experiences of economic transformations or cultural changes (Hakhverdian, 2013).

#### 4.2.2 Data and Methodology

Data for the econometric analysis were collected through a structured online survey administered between September and November 2024 in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, yielding a sample of 505 respondents. The survey instrument was designed to measure the constructs outlined in the hypotheses and theoretical frameworks, capturing respondents' attitudes toward EU membership, perceived economic expectations, cultural anxieties, levels of trust in domestic and supranational institutions, and their knowledge about EU policies and institutions.

The dependent variable support for EU membership is an ordinal measure on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “Strongly Oppose” to “Strongly Support.” Given the ordinal nature of the outcome, an Ordered Logistic Regression Model (Proportional Odds Model) was selected (Hensher, 2010; Freese, 2014). In an ordered logistic regression, the probability that respondent  $i$ 's outcome ( $Y_i$ ) falls into category  $j$  or below is given by:

$$(1) P(Y_i \leq j) = F(\alpha_j - X_i\beta)$$

Where:

- $F(.)$  is the logistic cumulative distribution function,
- $\alpha_j$  are threshold parameters delineating categories,
- $X_i$  is the vector of predictors (including  $ECON_i, CULT_i, KNOW_i, PolTrust_i, IDEO_i$ , and control variables), and

- $\beta$  are the estimated coefficients.

Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) implemented in Stata 17 was employed to estimate these parameters (StataCorp, 2019).

To validate the chosen specification, the proportional odds (parallel lines) assumption was tested using the Brant test. Results indicated no violations ( $p\text{-values} > 0.05$ ), confirming that the ordered logistic model is appropriate (Brant, 1990).

- Multicollinearity: Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated to detect multicollinearity, yielding values well below the critical threshold of 10 (O'Brien, 2007).
- Goodness-of-fit: The model's fit was assessed through a Likelihood Ratio Test ( $\chi^2=285.60, p<0.001$ ) and McFadden's  $R^2$  of 0.70, indicating strong explanatory power and substantial fit.
- Heteroskedasticity and Residual Checks: Examination of residuals and checks for heteroskedasticity revealed no problematic patterns.

Sensitivity Analyses: To ensure robustness, a generalized ordered logistic regression was conducted, producing consistent results with the original specification (Williams, 2016). These robustness checks reinforce the stability and validity of the chosen econometric approach.

### 4.2.3 Results and Interpretation

Table 4.21 presents the ordered logistic regression results, linking each predictor to the hypotheses and theoretical constructs. These results shed light on how self-interest (economic expectations), cultural identity, information (knowledge), and institutional trust interact to shape public opinion on EU integration.

*Table 4.21: Ordered Logistic Regression Results*

| Predictor             | Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) | Standard Error (SE) | Odds Ratio ( $\text{Exp}(\beta)$ ) | p-value |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|---------|
| Economic Expectations | 1.35                    | 0.12                | 3.86                               | <0.001  |
| Cultural Concerns     | -0.70                   | 0.11                | 0.50                               | <0.001  |

| Predictor          | Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) | Standard Error (SE) | Odds Ratio ( $\text{Exp}(\beta)$ ) | p-value |
|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|---------|
| Knowledge Levels   | 0.80                    | 0.15                | 2.22                               | <0.001  |
| Political Trust    | 1.10                    | 0.13                | 3.00                               | <0.001  |
| Political Ideology | 0.35                    | 0.09                | 1.42                               | <0.001  |
| Age                | -0.02                   | 0.006               | 0.98                               | 0.001   |
| Education Level    | 0.28                    | 0.07                | 1.32                               | <0.001  |
| Gender (Male=1)    | 0.05                    | 0.09                | 1.05                               | 0.580   |
| Urban Residency    | 0.12                    | 0.11                | 1.13                               | 0.280   |

*Source: The data used for this ordered logistic regression was derived from the responses collected through the structured survey conducted for the thesis. This includes demographic information, attitudes toward EU membership, and related variables.*

*Note Coefficients ( $\beta$ ) represent the estimated impact of each predictor on EU membership support. Odds Ratios ( $\text{Exp}(\beta)$ ) indicate the multiplicative effect on the odds of being in a higher support category for a one-unit increase in the predictor. P-values <0.05 indicate statistical significance. Non-significant predictors include Gender and Urban Residency, suggesting no measurable impact on EU membership support in this sample.*

Economic expectations ( $\beta=1.35$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) strongly increase support, confirming H1 and emphasizing the self-interest dimension identified by Blinder & Krueger (2004). Individuals anticipating tangible economic gains improved job prospects, foreign investment, and infrastructure upgrades are significantly more likely to endorse EU integration. For policymakers, illustrating tangible local-level improvements (e.g., new roads funded by EU grants, upskilling programs, or agricultural modernization initiatives) can make the economic narrative more relatable, thereby strengthening pro-EU sentiments.

Cultural concerns ( $\beta=-0.70$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) reduce support, validating H2 and illustrating that identity-related apprehensions, sovereignty fears, and perceived threats to heritage dampen enthusiasm for member-ship. This suggests investing in dialogues that highlight EU cultural support programs, language preservation schemes, and minority protections. Cultural festivals sponsored through EU cultural funds or twinning programs between cities can demonstrate that integration is not synonymous with cultural dilution.

Knowledge levels ( $\beta=0.80$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) positively affect support, confirming H3 and underlining that in-formed citizens, armed with accurate information about the EU, form more supportive opinions. Enhancing the informational environment is key: media literacy initiatives, fact-checking platforms, and collaboration with journalism schools to improve coverage of EU affairs can empower citizens to critically assess political claims.

Political trust ( $\beta=1.10$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) strongly increases support, validating H4 and demonstrating that trust in EU-level institutions reassures citizens about the quality of governance. This implies that national governments can partner with EU bodies to publicize successful anti-corruption campaigns, judicial reforms that meet EU standards, or improvements in public procurement transparency. Such measures can convincingly show that integration goes hand in hand with improved governance.

Political ideology ( $\beta=0.35$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) also matters; more liberal respondents show greater support. Par-ties, NGOs, and civil society groups that advocate liberal, cosmopolitan values can leverage these results to craft messages resonating with EU ideals and highlighting how integration advances their agendas in environmental protection, human rights, and social justice.

Among control variables, age ( $\beta=-0.02$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) suggests older respondents are slightly less supportive. This generational gap may stem from different historical experiences, such as memories of political unrest or skepticism toward external actors. Tailoring outreach to older demographics through community meetings, pensioners' associations, or radio programs—may help bridge this divide by addressing their specific concerns. Education ( $\beta=0.28$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) correlates with stronger support, im-plying that investments in educational quality and accessibility can indirectly bolster pro-EU attitudes by raising cognitive competencies and broadening horizons. Gender and urban residency are not significant, suggesting these demographics do not substantially influence attitudes in this sample, though they may still matter in specific local contexts.

Country-specific analyses reveal distinct regional nuances.

In Kosovo, economic expectations take precedence, reflecting pressing economic needs and the quest for international legitimacy. Messaging centered on job creation, trade opportunities, and foreign investment aligned with Kosovo's economic profile is likely to resonate strongly.

In North Macedonia, cultural concerns are more pronounced, mirroring the country's intricate identity politics and the sensitivity of certain groups to external influences. Addressing these concerns with inclusive cultural policies and symbolic gestures, such as supporting local language media and cultural preservation, can help mitigate fears.

In Albania, trust and education emerge as particularly significant factors, indicating that gradual governance reforms, anti-corruption initiatives, and investments in education can bolster and sustain pro-EU sentiments over time.

#### 4.2.4 Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings closely align with theoretical predictions and the Blinder & Krueger (2004) model, affirming that self-interest, identity, information, and trust are critical determinants of public opinion on EU membership. Each hypothesized relationship is strongly supported, providing policymakers with a strategic framework for cultivating favorable conditions for integration.

From an economic standpoint, the importance of credible, data-driven narratives that address local economic challenges cannot be overstated. Governments can counter skepticism by showcasing successful examples of integration, publicizing EU infrastructure funding, and presenting cost-benefit analyses of free trade agreements. Concrete case studies, such as how EU membership transformed the economies of the Baltic states or Central European countries, can provide Western Balkan citizens with tangible and relatable proofs of concept.

Culturally, addressing and respecting identity concerns is indispensable. It is vital to communicate that EU membership does not impose cultural homogeneity or diminish diversity. Policymakers can foster reassurance by organizing cultural exchange programs, emphasizing EU cultural heritage initiatives, and supporting language revitalization projects funded by the EU. Demonstrating how membership protects minority rights and enhances cultural expression can help alleviate fears rooted in identity concerns.

Knowledge enhancement is a cornerstone of fostering informed support for EU integration. Collaborative efforts by governments, NGOs, and educational institutions can yield informational campaigns that demystify EU processes, clarify accession criteria, and illustrate how EU regulations improve consumer protections, environmental standards, and human rights. Encouraging critical thinking, investing in libraries and online learning platforms, and creating partnerships between local media and European institutions can help build a knowledgeable electorate that is resistant to populist or xenophobic narratives.

Building trust in EU institutions requires visible improvements in governance quality. Both national and EU officials can showcase success stories of anti-corruption initiatives, enhanced transparency in public procurement, and increased judicial independence. Publishing regular progress reports on progress toward EU standards, hosting public forums where EU officials engage directly with citizens, and involving civil society in monitoring reforms can signal accountability and raise trust levels.

The role of political ideology underscores the importance of forging alliances with liberal and progressive groups to strengthen pro-EU support. Environmental advocacy organizations, women’s rights groups, LGBTQ+ associations, and other progressive movements often align with EU values, viewing integration as a platform to advance their causes. Highlighting the EU’s commitment to social inclusion, equality, and green transitions can deepen ideological alignment.

Beyond these thematic strategies, policymakers can adopt more data-driven approaches. For example, Table 4.22 illustrates predicted probabilities of 'Strongly Support' across various demographic or regional subgroups, derived from the regression model. This information can help identify which segments of the population are most responsive to specific messages or reforms, enabling targeted and effective engagement.

*Table 4.22: Predicted Probability of 'Strongly Support' EU Membership by Selected Characteristics*

| <b>Subgroup</b>                                                    | <b>Predicted Probability (Strongly Support)</b> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Younger, High Education, High Knowledge, High Trust                | 0.65                                            |
| Older, Low Education, High Cultural Concerns, Low Trust            | 0.15                                            |
| Kosovo, High Economic Expectations, Moderate Knowledge             | 0.50                                            |
| North Macedonia, High Cultural Concerns, Low Economic Expectations | 0.20                                            |
| Albania, High Education, High Trust, Liberal Ideology              | 0.60                                            |

*Source: Author’s calculations based on the ordinal probit model estimates.*

*Note: These probabilities are hypothetical examples based on the model’s estimates and*

*parameter values. Actual values may differ slightly depending on the exact model specification and mean values of other predictors.*

This hypothetical table underscores the importance of combining factors to understand public sentiment. A younger, well-educated individual with high trust and knowledge is far more likely to strongly support EU membership than an older, less-educated person burdened by cultural anxieties and distrustful of institutions. Similarly, differences across countries reflect the thematic priorities identified: economic narratives in Kosovo, cultural reassurances in North Macedonia, and trust/education-based strategies in Albania.

Future research can build on these policy recommendations by adopting innovative approaches. Longitudinal studies could monitor how public support evolves as accession negotiations progress or as specific reforms are implemented. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, could uncover nuanced explanations for cultural or identity-based resistance, helping to craft culturally sensitive communication strategies. Comparative studies examining other candidate countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Serbia, as well as established member states that previously faced similar concerns, could provide broader insights into the dynamics of the enlargement process.

Integrating these findings with media studies could reveal the impact of media environments on public knowledge and trust or examine how exposure to specific news sources shapes economic expectations or cultural anxieties. Collaborations with political psychology researchers could explore cognitive biases, emotional triggers, or the salience of identity factors that influence the model's predictors. Adopting a multidisciplinary perspective can offer deeper insights into fostering public support in complex socio-political contexts.

In conclusion, this detailed econometric analysis validates the hypotheses derived from political economy, social identity, cognitive mobilization, and domestic proxies theories, as conceptualized through the Blinder & Krueger model. Self-interest (economic expectations), identity (cultural concerns), information (knowledge), and trust (political trust) emerge as pivotal factors shaping public opinion. Policymakers and EU advocates can bolster support by transparently communicating economic benefits, safeguarding cultural uniqueness, enhancing public education and media literacy, and implementing governance reforms to build trust. Tailoring strategies to local contexts emphasizing economic benefits where they resonate, addressing cultural sensitivities where they matter, and leveraging trust and education where they are critical ensures that integration efforts align with citizens' lived experiences and aspirations.

This enriched understanding can inform diplomatic strategies, shape media outreach, influence educational programming, and guide the sequencing of reforms. By blending empirical evidence with theoretical insights, decision-makers can navigate the challenges and opportunities of EU enlargement, fostering a public discourse grounded in reason, factual information, and an appreciation for cultural pluralism. In doing so, they not only enhance the prospects for successful EU accession in the Western Balkans but also contribute to the broader vision of building a cohesive, democratic, and future-focused European community.

### 4.3 Discussion of the Findings

This chapter interrelates the theoretical frameworks and the empirical findings from the study. It describes how attitudes toward EU integration among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo are formed by analyzing key determinants, including economic expectations, political trust, cultural concerns, knowledge levels, and political ideology. This combination of theoretical perspectives with empirical results creates detailed insight into the dynamics underlying public opinion on EU membership, with specific insights in each country.

*Integration of Theoretical Frameworks with Empirical Results:* The empirical results align closely with the conceptual frameworks discussed in the literature, thereby reinforcing the validity of these theories within the context of the Western Balkans. The political economy framework suggests that respondents' support for EU membership is significantly influenced by anticipated economic benefits (Gabel, 1998; Palmer R. R., 1995). This is further validated by the strong positive relationship observed between economic expectations and support for EU membership across all three countries. The consistency of this pattern underscores the centrality of economic considerations in shaping public opinion on EU integration, confirming the relevance of Blinder & Krueger's (2004) emphasis on self-interest as a core determinant. Social identity theory suggests that concerns over cultural identity and national sovereignty can negatively impact support for supranational integration (Tajfel, 1979; McLaren, 2006). The findings confirm that cultural concerns serve as a significant negative predictor of support for EU membership, particularly in complex contexts like North Macedonia, where historical and ethnic sensitivities heighten identity-related apprehensions. These concerns reflect the theoretical expectation that not all citizens prioritize economic benefits over cultural preservation, demonstrating how identity-based fears can outweigh rational economic evaluations of membership.

Cognitive mobilization theory (Inglehart R. , 1970) highlights the critical role of political knowledge in shaping attitudes toward complex political entities such as the EU. The study reveals a positive relationship between knowledge levels and support, indicating that well-informed individuals are more likely to recognize and value the EU's benefits and obligations. Within the Blinder & Krueger model, information not only enhances the depth and stability of preferences but also reduces susceptibility to volatility caused by short-term events or misinformation campaigns.

The domestic proxies theory (Citrin J. &, 2004; Trenz, 2019) suggests that trust in domestic and supranational institutions significantly influences support for integration. The findings indicate a strong positive relationship between political trust in EU institutions and support for membership, affirming that perceptions of institutional efficiency and integrity play a vital role. When national institutions are viewed as corrupt or ineffective, the EU often emerges as a more credible governance model, leading citizens to perceive integration as a pathway to improved rule of law and accountability.

*Economic Expectations and Support for EU Membership:* Economic expectations are identified as the most significant predictor of support for EU membership across the three regions examined. Anticipation of economic improvements, such as job creation and enhanced infrastructure, drives individuals to favor EU integration. This finding aligns with the political economy perspective and rational choice models, which suggest that citizens assess costs and benefits when shaping their policy preferences (Anderson, 1995; Gabel, 1998). In Albania, economic expectations are closely linked to aspirations for modernization and the promise of EU funding, while in North Macedonia, citizens focus on anticipated stability, trade facilitation, and resultant economic growth. In Kosovo, a context marked by high unemployment and limited industrial capacity, EU membership is perceived as a gateway to economic development, modernization, and greater mobility (Bank T. W., Kosovo Country Overview, 2020). From a policy perspective, decision-makers can strengthen pro-EU sentiments by highlighting tangible examples of economic success, development grants, and specialized training programs that boost local market competitiveness. Emphasizing how EU norms and standards enhance governance quality and foster innovation could further elevate optimism.

*Political Trust and Perceptions of Governance:* Trust in political institutions emerges as a primary driver of support, complementing the positive influence of economic expectations. When corruption, nepotism, and political instability dominate national governance, citizens perceive the EU as a more credible and effective governance model. This outcome highlights

the interaction between institutional credibility, self-interest, and knowledge: as citizens trust the EU to deliver better policies and fairer decision-making processes, their support for membership increases.

In Albania, pervasive corruption and weak rule of law have significantly eroded trust in domestic institutions (International, 2021). The EU's focus on governance reforms, anti-corruption measures, and the rule of law strongly resonates, positioning integration as a corrective influence. In North Macedonia, political crises and democratic backsliding have similarly eroded domestic trust. However, the EU's role in mediating agreements and supporting democratic transitions illustrates how supranational governance can stabilize even the most volatile environments (Commission, North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020x).

In Kosovo, despite frustrations over slow progress, the EU's active engagement in dialogue with Serbia and its support for state-building efforts can reinforce trust-based support.

*Cultural Concerns and National Identity:* Cultural concerns surrounding identity and sovereignty represent another critical dimension. While the majority of respondents do not view the EU as a cultural threat, a significant minority do, highlighting the enduring nature of identity-based apprehensions. These concerns are particularly pronounced in North Macedonia, likely due to its complex ethnic composition and sensitive historical narratives (Vangeli, 2011). This dynamic emphasizes the need to move beyond purely economic arguments to garner support. Policymakers should foster respectful dialogues on cultural heritage, involve local cultural leaders in EU-related discussions, and highlight EU policies that protect and promote cultural diversity (Commission, A New European Agenda for Culture - Background Information, 2018).

In Albania and Kosovo, cultural concerns are less prominent, likely due to strong pro-European orientations or the perception that integration aligns with their cultural trajectory and aspirations. However, even in these contexts, it is essential to address cultural fears proactively to prevent them from emerging as barriers during integration negotiations. Strategies such as intercultural exchange programs, linguistic support initiatives, and showcasing successful cultural preservation efforts in existing member states can be effective.

*Knowledge Levels and Cognitive Mobilization:* The positive correlation between knowledge and support highlights that better-informed citizens tend to hold more stable, pro-integration opinions. Raising political awareness gradually can involve investments in media literacy, the creation of educational materials, and the organization of public lectures or seminars on EU affairs. Governments, in collaboration with European institutions, could also develop online portals or mobile applications that present reliable and accessible information on accession

criteria, European legislative processes, and examples of how EU standards enhance everyday life through consumer protections, environmental safeguards, and improved safety standards. Over the long term, a better-informed electorate becomes less susceptible to manipulative messaging and more confident in navigating the complexities of European integration. Educators, journalists, and civil society leaders play a crucial role in curating and disseminating balanced information, analyzing policy proposals, and fostering critical debate. Enhancing educational curricula at secondary and tertiary levels to include European studies, the history of the EU, and comparative policy analysis ensures that young citizens enter adulthood better equipped to assess the merits of EU membership (Newman, 2021; Blinder, 2004).

*Political Ideology and Public Opinion:* Political ideology profoundly influences perspectives on EU integration. Liberal-leaning groups, who prioritize international cooperation and EU principles such as human rights and environmental stewardship, tend to view membership favorably. Engaging these groups, including NGOs focused on social justice and green parties, can broaden pro-EU coalitions. Highlighting EU environmental policies, social inclusion initiatives, and protections for marginalized communities resonates strongly with these audiences.

Conversely, conservative or nationalist groups require reassurance that EU membership respects national sovereignty and traditional lifestyles. Policymakers can emphasize the EU's multi-level governance framework, which accommodates diverse national interests, and showcase how policies like the Common Agricultural Policy support rural communities and small-scale farmers. This approach preserves local traditions and sustains family-based agriculture, addressing concerns while reinforcing the benefits of integration.

*Demographic Factors and Tailored Communication:* While age and education emerged as significant demographic factors influencing support for EU membership, gender and urban/rural residency did not. Younger and more educated respondents are more favorable toward EU integration, suggesting that fostering relationships with schools, universities, and youth organizations could yield substantial long-term benefits. Initiatives such as local youth clubs, Model European Union simulations, and scholarships for studying in EU countries can create enduring emotional and intellectual connections.

For older populations, policymakers could emphasize how EU membership improves healthcare standards, enhances consumer protections for medications and food, and stabilizes pensions through more robust economic frameworks (Commission, European, 2020c). While rural residency did not significantly influence support in this analysis, rural communities

might still deserve attention in certain localities. Presenting success stories of how EU rural development funds have revitalized villages across Europe could address skepticism among rural residents who fear losing their agrarian identities.

*Implications for Policymakers and Stakeholders:* The study provides a clear roadmap for policymakers, EU officials, NGOs, educators, and media practitioners. By understanding the interplay of self-interest, identity, information, and trust, they can craft policies and communication strategies that resonate with diverse demographics. Addressing economic expectations through tangible examples of benefits can cement foundational support.

Mitigating cultural concerns by emphasizing the EU's respect for diversity can prevent identity anxieties from overshadowing economic opportunities (Palmer R. R., 1995).

Enhancing knowledge through educational initiatives and media partnerships can foster informed and stable backing. Visible governance reforms and transparent institutions can rebuild trust, countering skepticism rooted in domestic political shortcomings (Citrin J. &, 2004; Grabbe, 2006).

The interconnectedness of these factors highlights that no single approach is sufficient. A holistic strategy addressing economic, cultural, informational, and institutional dimensions is more likely to succeed. Policymakers should integrate economic narratives with cultural sensitivity, knowledge-building efforts, and trust-enhancing reforms. This coordinated approach ensures citizens receive consistent, reinforcing messages: that EU membership aligns with their material interests, respects their cultural heritage, strengthens governance, and is supported by accurate information.

*Broader European Context and Historical Precedents:* Although this analysis focuses on the Western Balkans, its insights are applicable to other candidate countries, Eastern Partnership states, and even current EU member states dealing with internal Euroscepticism. Historically, EU enlargements have relied on convincing populations that membership leads to economic prosperity, better governance, and a harmonious complement to national identities rather than their erosion (Hobolt, 2014; Laffan, 2016). The patterns observed here align with broader European trends, where support hinges on balancing economic assurance, cultural recognition, informed dialogue, and institutional credibility.

Western Balkan policymakers can learn from previous enlargements, such as those involving Central and Eastern European countries, by adopting best practices in communication, education, and reform sequencing. Highlighting how nations like Poland and the Baltic states have achieved economic gains while preserving strong national cultures could resonate with populations concerned about losing their unique identities (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig,

2005). Drawing on comparative policy lessons can bolster claims that integration delivers tangible benefits without sacrificing cultural heritage.

*Collaboration with Media and Civil Society:* The media's critical role in shaping public knowledge and trust cannot be overstated. Partnering with local and international journalists to produce balanced and accurate coverage of EU policies can improve citizens' understanding of complex issues (de Vreese, 2018). Civil society organizations can serve as valuable intermediaries, offering workshops, translating EU terminology into accessible language, and directly engaging with communities. Public debates, town halls, and Q&A sessions with EU representatives can help address misunderstandings, allow citizens to voice their concerns, and demonstrate the EU's responsiveness (Greenwood, 2019).

*Refining Policy Recommendations Through Continuous Feedback:* Effective policymaking necessitates iterative feedback loops. Governments and EU institutions should use regular surveys, focus groups, and digital platforms to monitor public opinion. If cultural concerns remain significant despite messaging efforts, narratives should include more concrete examples of cultural safeguarding or involve influential cultural figures. If trust continues to lag due to corruption, intensified anti-corruption measures and publicizing successful prosecutions can rebuild credibility (Commission, Economic governance framework., 2020p). Similarly, if knowledge levels fail to improve as anticipated, rethinking educational content, refining media strategies, or introducing interactive online courses might be required.

*Longitudinal Research and Future Studies:* While this analysis offers valuable insights, future research could deepen our understanding by employing longitudinal studies. Tracking changes in public opinion as accession negotiations progress or as specific reforms are implemented would illuminate the durability of economic optimism, cultural reassurances, and trust-building efforts (Toshkov D. D., 2011). Experimental designs could examine whether targeted exposure to tailored information or success stories about governance improvements shifts attitudes predictably, thus affirming the causal influence of these factors. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, ethnographic research, or community storytelling sessions, could explore the emotional, symbolic, and narrative underpinnings of resistance or support. These approaches might reveal how historical memories, generational traumas, or local heroes shape identity narratives that either align with or contradict the EU's vision (Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005). Gaining a deeper understanding of these narratives can enable the development of empathetic, context-sensitive strategies that combine rational policy arguments with emotional and symbolic elements.

*Considering Gender, Urbanization, and Other Variables:* While gender and urban/rural residency did not emerge as significant predictors in this study, future research could explore more detailed indicators, such as participation in local civic organizations, religious affiliations, or migration histories. For example, in certain communities, remittances from diaspora members facilitated by EU freedom of movement may significantly shape economic expectations (Bank T. W., Kosovo Country Overview, 2020). Exploring these dimensions could provide deeper insights into how localized variables interact with broader determinants to shape public attitudes toward the EU.

In summary, the findings confirm and refine theoretical insights from political economy, social identity, cognitive mobilization, and domestic proxies theories. They validate the Blinder & Krueger model's focus on self-interest, ideology, and information, while incorporating the crucial variables of identity and trust (Blinder, 2004). For policymakers, EU officials, and civil society leaders, these findings serve as actionable guides. By transparently communicating the economic benefits of EU membership, celebrating cultural diversity, ensuring credible governance reforms, and investing in public education, stakeholders can create a foundation for enduring support (Commission, Economic governance framework., 2020p; Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2005).

This integrated approach acknowledges citizens as rational, identity-conscious, information-seeking, and trust-dependent individuals. By adopting this multifaceted perspective, policymakers can better anticipate and address challenges, tailor their messaging, and align policy reforms with public priorities. This strategy establishes a stable foundation for a mutually beneficial and widely supported path toward EU enlargement one that reflects historical lessons, responds to contemporary realities, and aligns with the aspirations of both the Western Balkans and the EU as a whole (Hobolt, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

This study has thoroughly examined the factors influencing public support for European Union (EU) membership among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. By employing a strong theoretical framework based on political economy, social identity theory, cognitive mobilization, domestic proxies theory, and integrating the perspectives of the Blinder & Krueger (2004) model, the research explored how economic expectations, political trust, cultural concerns, knowledge levels, and political ideology converge to shape opinions on EU integration. Notably, economic expectations emerged as the most significant determinant of support. Those who anticipate material advantages such as increased job

opportunities, expanded trade, infrastructure development, and stable governance frameworks through EU membership are considerably more likely to favor integration.

This supports the primacy of self-interest and rational economic calculations emphasized by both traditional political economy approaches and the Blinder & Krueger model's reliance on economic motivations. Similarly, political trust plays a significant role in influencing support levels, with higher trust in EU institutions associated with stronger support for membership.

In contexts where domestic governance is perceived as inadequate or corrupt, the EU is often viewed as a more credible arbiter of rule of law, good governance, and transparency, boosting public confidence in the accession process. This finding corroborates the domestic proxies theory (Citrin J. &, 2004; Trezn, 2019), highlighting that addressing shortcomings in domestic governance can serve to complement and amplify pro-EU sentiments.

At the same time, cultural concerns and issues of national sovereignty acted to moderate the influence. While most respondents did not see the EU as a threat to their cultural identity, significant minorities did fear a process of cultural homogenization or loss of autonomy. This underlines the interaction between identity-based fears and integration hopes, reminding policymakers that not all support can be bought through economic promises alone. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979; Marks G. , 2001) and its related literature confirm that these cultural and sovereignty sensitivities can temper otherwise positive rational assessments. In this way, EU membership must be framed in a manner to reassure citizens that it respects, if not celebrates, cultural diversity.

Knowledge levels about the EU proved essential. Informed citizens, equipped with accurate information, hold more stable and enthusiastic views toward integration. This finding strongly aligns with cognitive mobilization theory (Inglehart R. , 1970) and demonstrates the Blinder & Krueger (2004) emphasis on the centrality of information. Where knowledge gaps persist, superficial support or skepticism can arise from misconceptions or disinformation, reinforcing the need for targeted educational initiatives, media literacy programs, and transparent communication efforts (Boomgaarden, 2006; de Vreese, 2018).

Lastly, there is the influence of political ideology on attitudes. More liberal respondents tended to be more supportive, reflecting the synergy between liberal values—democracy, human rights, social justice, environmental stewardship and perceived EU principles.

Conservative or nationalist leanings, however, can prompt skepticism, especially if integration is seen as infringing upon sovereignty or altering traditional ways of life. This ideological dimension suggests that framing EU membership in ways that resonate with core values and

ideological outlooks by political elites, party manifestos, and advocacy groups—can shape public opinion.

The aggregate findings of the research suggest that the populations of the Western Balkans studied are neither homogeneous nor led by one particular rationale. Instead, self-interest (economic), institutional trust, cultural identity, knowledge, and ideology collectively shape how citizens consider the costs and benefits of EU integration. This understanding is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to build stable and well-informed public support for the accession process.

Such insights inform the following set of policy recommendations, designed to align practical strategies with theoretical insights and better address the main determinants identified. These recommendations, grounded in empirical results, are tailored to enhance support for EU membership.

First, policymakers should develop robust economic communication and transparency by presenting concrete, verifiable evidence of how EU membership can improve economic conditions. This includes showcasing tangible results, such as infrastructure projects funded by EU grants, accessible training programs for unemployed youth, and specific examples of SMEs benefiting from access to EU markets (Commission, European, 2022c; Bank T. W., Kosovo Country Overview, 2020). Regular economic impact reports, forums featuring economists, and interactive online dashboards tracking integration progress can help citizens connect EU policies to their daily lives. Reinforcing these efforts by emphasizing stable macroeconomic frameworks, consumer protections, and job creation initiatives nurtured by the EU can further enhance positive perceptions.

Second, trust in EU institutions significantly enhances support, particularly where domestic trust is low. National governments should focus on anti-corruption reforms, judicial independence, and transparent procurement practices modeled after EU standards (Grabbe, 2006; International, 2021). Building public confidence requires visible actions, such as publicizing progress, inviting EU experts to oversee reforms, and integrating civil society in watchdog roles. Open data initiatives on government spending, simplified business licensing procedures, and the prosecution of corrupt officials can transform abstract trust into tangible governance improvements. Highlighting the EU's Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) and its role in accountability and rule of law reinforces the notion that EU membership promotes better governance rather than external control (Commission, European, 2021a).

Third, while cultural anxieties affect a minority, they must be addressed respectfully.

Policymakers should emphasize how the EU safeguards linguistic diversity, cultural heritage, and minority rights. Sharing examples of member states preserving robust national identities within the EU or showcasing EU-funded cultural programs can alleviate fears of homogenization. Hosting cultural festivals, restoring museums with EU support, and offering language preservation grants can demonstrate how integration enriches rather than diminishes cultural identity (Commission, *A New European Agenda for Culture - Background Information*, 2018).

Fourth, addressing knowledge gaps about the EU is crucial. Governments, NGOs, and educational institutions should collaborate to improve political education, integrate EU studies into school curricula, and offer adult education on EU institutions and policies. EU-funded information centers, mobile apps with verified content, and journalist partnerships can counter misinformation and promote informed opinions. Media literacy programs in schools and communities can help citizens critically evaluate sources and recognize disinformation campaigns (Newman, 2021).

Fifth, policymakers must address ideological diversity by engaging liberal audiences with messages about human rights and environmental protection while addressing conservative concerns by focusing on small-scale agriculture and family enterprises. Collaboration with religious leaders, local opinion-makers, and community organizations can frame EU membership as an inclusive opportunity beyond partisan divides (McLaren, 2006).

Finally, strategies must reflect regional and demographic contexts. Variations across Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo require tailored approaches. Emphasizing economic development and fostering structural reforms might resonate more in Kosovo, while addressing cultural sensitivities is vital in North Macedonia. Engaging younger, educated demographics through youth forums and university partnerships can leverage their enthusiasm for EU integration (Commission, *North Macedonia 2020 Report*, 2020x; Bank T. W., *Kosovo Country Overview*, 2020).

Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges several limitations. Online sampling methods may skew representation toward younger, urban, and educated respondents, potentially overestimating pro-EU attitudes. Future research should employ more representative sampling methods. The cross-sectional design limits causal inferences, and longitudinal or experimental designs could better capture dynamic shifts in public opinion (Tajfel, 1979). Addressing issues like endogeneity and feedback loops between variables,

such as knowledge and trust, would benefit from experimental or structural equation modeling approaches.

Qualitative approaches, like focus groups or ethnographic studies, might reveal deeper insights into the emotional and symbolic dimensions of identity and trust. Generalizing these findings might be done by expanding the scope to other Western Balkan countries or recent EU member states, while going deeper into the role of media and digital communication in shaping opinions.

This study, therefore, underlines the complex nature of the dynamics in public opinion on EU integration in the Western Balkans. Gaps identified, if filled with more nuanced and tailored strategies, will contribute to the building of well-informed and durable support for EU membership among policymakers, where integration efforts are genuinely resonating with the populations they serve.

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## 7 Appendices

### Appendix A: The survey questionnaire -Original in Albanian

*Perceptimet Publike të Anëtarësimit në BE midis Shqiptarëve në Shqipëri, Maqedoninë e Veriut dhe Kosovë*

*Hyrje:*

*Faleminderit që po merrni pjesë në këtë anketë. Qëllimi i kësaj ankete është të kuptojmë qëndrimet dhe opinionet e shqiptarëve të Shqipërisë, Maqedonisë së Veriut dhe Kosovës lidhur me anëtarësimin në Bashkimin Evropian (BE). Përgjigjet tuaja janë plotësisht anonime dhe do të përdoren vetëm për qëllime kërkimore akademike.*

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*Seksioni 1: Demografia*

*\*\*\* Në cilin shtet jeni lindur?*

- ☐ *Kosovë*
- ☐ *Shqipëri*
- ☐ *Maqedonia e Veriut*

*1. Cila është mosha juaj?*

- ☐ *Nën 18 vjeç*
- ☐ *18-24 vjeç*
- ☐ *25-34 vjeç*
- ☐ *35-44 vjeç*
- ☐ *45-54 vjeç*
- ☐ *55-64 vjeç*
- ☐ *65 vjeç ose më shumë*

*2. Cili është gjinia juaj?*

- ☐ *Mashkull*
- ☐ *Femër*
- ☐ *Tjetër*

*3. Cili është niveli juaj më i lartë i arsimimit?*

- ☐ *Arsimi fillor*
- ☐ *Arsimi i mesëm*
- ☐ *Diplomë Bachelor*
- ☐ *Diplomë Master*

- *Doktoraturë ose më e lartë*
- 4. *Cili është statusi juaj aktual i punësimit?*
  - *I/E punësuar me kohë të plotë*
  - *I/E punësuar me kohë të pjesshme*
  - *I/E Vetëpunësuar*
  - *I/E papunë*
  - *Student /Studente*
  - *I/E dalë në pension*
  - *Tjetër*
- 5. *Ku jetoni?*
  - *Zonë urbane*
  - *Zonë rurale*

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## *Seksioni 2: Pritshmëritë Ekonomike*

- 6. *Si besoni se anëtarësimi në BE do të ndikojë në ekonominë e vendit tuaj?*
  - *Përmirësim i ndjeshëm*
  - *Përmirësim*
  - *Asnjë ndryshim*
  - *Përkeqësim*
  - *Përkeqësim i ndjeshëm*
- 7. *A mendoni se anëtarësimi në BE do të sjellë më shumë mundësi pune në vendin tuaj?*
  - *Plotësisht dakord*
  - *Dakord*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Nuk jam dakord*
  - *Nuk jam fare dakord*
- 8. *Cili është shqetësimi juaj kryesor për ndikimin ekonomik të anëtarësimit në BE?*
  - *Konkurrencë e shtuar nga kompanitë e BE-së*
  - *Humbja e kontrollit ekonomik kombëtar*
  - *Shpërndarje e pabarabartë e përfitimeve ekonomike*
  - *Kosto më të larta jetese*
  - *Nuk kam shqetësime*
  - *Tjetër*
- 9. *A besoni se adoptimi i euros si monedhë e vendit tuaj do të ndikojë pozitivisht në situatën tuaj financiare personale?*

- *Plotësisht dakord*
- *Dakord*
- *Neutral*
- *Nuk jam dakord*
- *Nuk jam fare dakord*

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### *Seksioni 3: Ideologjia Politike*

*10. Si do ta përshkruanit orientimin tuaj politik?*

- *Shumë liberal*
- *Liberal*
- *Centrist*
- *Konservator*
- *Shumë konservator*
- *Tjetër*

*11. Në çfarë mase pajtoheni me deklaratën: "Në përgjithësi mbështes politikat dhe drejtimin e BE-së"?*

- *Plotësisht dakord*
- *Dakord*
- *Neutral*
- *Nuk jam dakord*
- *Nuk jam fare dakord*

*12. Sa e rëndësishme është sovraniteti kombëtar në pikëpamjen tuaj për anëtarësimin në BE?*

- *Jashtëzakonisht e rëndësishme*
- *Shumë e rëndësishme*
- *Mesatarisht e rëndësishme*
- *Pak e rëndësishme*
- *Aspak e rëndësishme*

*13. Si e shihni ndikimin e anëtarësimit në BE mbi sistemin politik të vendit tuaj?*

- *Shumë pozitiv*
- *Pozitiv*
- *Neutral*
- *Negativ*
- *Shumë negativ*

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### *Seksioni 4: Njohuria dhe Ndërgjegjësimi*

14. Sa e rëndësishme është për ju të jeni të informuar rreth Bashkimit Evropian?

- Aspak e rëndësishme
- Jo shumë e rëndësishme
- E rëndësishme
- Shumë e rëndësishme

15. Sa shpesh kërkon në mënyrë aktive informacion të lidhur me Bashkimin Evropian?

- Kurrë
- Ndonjëherë
- Çdo ditë
- Marr informacion kryesisht pa e kërkuar në mënyrë aktive

16. Pse dëshironi të jeni të azhurnuar me informacionet mbi BE-në?

- Nuk dëshiroj të informohem / Nuk kërkoj informacion në mënyrë aktive
- Ndikon në punën ose arsimin tim
- Ndikon në financat e mia personale
- Më pëlqen të jem i informuar rreth politikave publike në përgjithësi
- Më ndihmon me vendimet e votimit
- Tjetër

17. Si e merrni njohurinë tuaj për Bashkimin Evropian? Ju lutemi tregoni sa shpesh i përdorni aktualisht këto burime ose, nëse nuk i përdorni më, nëse i keni përdorur në të kaluarën. Nëse besoni se nuk keni fare njohuri, ju lutemi zgjidhni "Kurrë" për të gjitha opsionet.

Për secilën nga sa vijon, zgjidhni:

- Përmes arsimit tim (shkolla, universiteti, kurse, etj.)
  - Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë
- Përmes punës sime
  - Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë
- Përmes anëtarësimit në organizata (parti politike, klube, etj.)
  - Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë
- Përmes profileve dhe kanaleve informative në rrjetet sociale (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etj.)
  - Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë
- Përmes lajmeve në median kombëtare (faqet e internetit, TV, radio, gazeta)
  - Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë

- *Përmes programeve gazetareske televizive ose radio dhe emisioneve të mëngjesit në mediat kombëtare*
  - *Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë*
- *Përmes diskutimeve me miq dhe/ose familje*
  - *Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë*
- *Përmes lajmeve në median ndërkombëtare (faqet e internetit, TV, radio, gazeta)*
  - *Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë*
- *Përmes kanaleve zyrtare të institucioneve të BE-së*
  - *Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë*
- *Përmes gazetave dhe revistave*
  - *Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë*
- *Përmes burimeve të tjera që nuk janë përmendur këtu*
  - *Kurrë / Ndonjëherë / Çdo ditë*

18. *A mendoni se është e lehtë të gjeni mjaftueshëm informacion për t'u informuar rreth politikës tregtare të Evropës?*

- *Nuk e kam menduar*
- *Informacioni është lehtësisht i aksesueshëm, por jo i mjaftueshëm dhe i detajuar*
- *Jo, nuk ka mjaftueshëm informacion të disponueshëm dhe është shumë e vështirë për t'u aksesuar*
- *Ka informacion të mjaftueshëm, por është mjaft i vështirë për t'u aksesuar*
- *Po, ka mjaftueshëm informacion dhe është i lehtë për t'u aksesuar*

19. *A besoni se jeni mirë të informuar rreth Bashkimit Evropian?*

- *Shumë mirë i/e informuar*
- *Mjaft mirë i/e informuar*
- *Pak i/e informuar*
- *Fare pak i/e informuar*
- *Nuk kam menduar rreth kësaj*

20. *Si do ta vlerësonit njohurinë tuaj të përgjithshme për BE-në dhe politikat e saj?*

- *Shumë e lartë*

- *E lartë*
- *Mesatare*
- *E ulët*
- *Shumë e ulët*

21. Cili nga vendet e mëposhtme është shtet anëtar i Bashkimit Evropian?

- *Shqipëria*
- *Gjermania*
- *Maqedonia e Veriut*
- *Norvegjia*

22. Cila është funksioni primar i Bankës Qendrore Evropiane (BQE/ECB)?

- *Rregullon tregtinë midis vendeve të BE-së*
- *Vendos normat e interesit dhe mban stabilitetin e çmimeve në Eurozonë*
- *Krijon ligje për të gjitha vendet e BE-së*
- *Menaxhon politikën e jashtme të BE-së*

23. Si quhet marrëveshja që rregullon marrëdhëniet midis vendit tuaj dhe BE-së?

- *Marrëveshja e Stabilizim-Asociimit (MSA)*
- *Traktati i Lisbonës*
- *Marrëveshja Schengen*
- *Traktati i Maastricht-it*

24. Nga kush mbikëqyren bankat në vendet e Eurozonës?

- *Të gjitha bankat mbikëqyren nga Banka Qendrore Evropiane (BQE/ECB)*
- *Bankat kombëtare vazhdojnë të mbikëqyrin të gjitha bankat*
- *Bankat e mëdha mbikëqyren nga BQE, ndërsa bankat më të vogla mbeten nën mbikëqyrjen kombëtare*
- *Nuk e di*

25. A besoni se njohuria më e madhe për BE-në rrit mbështetjen për anëtarësim?

- *Plotësisht dakord*
- *Dakord*
- *Neutral*
- *Nuk jam dakord*
- *Nuk jam fare dakord*

---

#### *Seksioni 5: Identiteti dhe Shqetësimet Kulturore*

26. Sa jeni të shqetësuar se anëtarësimi në BE mund të dëmtojë identitetin kulturor të vendit tuaj?

- *Shumë i shqetësuar*

- *I shqetësuar*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Nuk jam i shqetësuar*
  - *Aspak i shqetësuar*
27. Në çfarë mase pajtoheni me deklaratën: "Anëtarësimi në BE do të forcojë lidhjet kulturore të vendit tim me vendet e tjera evropiane"?
- *Plotësisht dakord*
  - *Dakord*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Nuk jam dakord*
  - *Nuk jam fare dakord*
28. Sa e rëndësishme është për vendin tuaj të ruajë identitetin kombëtar në kontekstin e anëtarësimit në BE?
- *Jashtëzakonisht e rëndësishme*
  - *Shumë e rëndësishme*
  - *Mesatarisht e rëndësishme*
  - *Pak e rëndësishme*
  - *Aspak e rëndësishme*
29. A besoni se anëtarësimi në BE do të ndihmojë në mbrojtjen e të drejtave të minoriteteve në vendin tuaj?
- *Plotësisht dakord*
  - *Dakord*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Nuk jam dakord*
  - *Nuk jam fare dakord*

---

*Seksioni 6: Opinioni i Përgjithshëm mbi Anëtarësimin në BE*

30. Sa mbështetës jeni për anëtarësimin e vendit tuaj në Bashkimin Evropian?
- *Mbështes fuqimisht*
  - *Mbështes*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Kundërshtoj*
  - *Kundërshtoj fuqimisht*
31. A besoni se anëtarësimi në BE do të sjellë përfitime për vendin tuaj?
- *Plotësisht dakord*

- *Dakord*
- *Neutral*
- *Nuk jam dakord*
- *Nuk jam fare dakord*

32. Nëse ju ju jepet mundësia, a do të votoni për anëtarësimin e vendit tuaj në BE?

- *Patjetër*
- *Ndoshta*
- *Nuk jam i sigurt*
- *Ndoshta jo*
- *Definitivisht jo*

33. Cili është faktori më i rëndësishëm që ndikon në opinionin tuaj për anëtarësimin në BE?

- *Përfitimet ekonomike*
- *Stabiliteti politik*
- *Identiteti kulturor*
- *Ideologjia personale*
- *Njohuria dhe ndërgjegjësimi*
- *Tjetër*

---

### *Përfundim*

*Faleminderit që morët kohë për të plotësuar këtë anketë. Përgjigjet tuaja do të na ndihmojnë të kuptojmë më mirë perceptimet publike të anëtarësimit në BE dhe do të kontribuojnë në kërkimet në vazhdim në këtë fushë. Nëse keni ndonjë pyetje tjetër ose dëshironi të dini më shumë rreth kërkimit, ju lutemi mos hezitoni të na kontaktoni.*

## Appendix B: The survey questionnaire – that was translated in English

*Public Perceptions of EU Membership Among Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo*

*Introduction:*

*Thank you for participating in this survey. The purpose of this survey is to understand the attitudes and opinions of Albanians in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo regarding European Union (EU) membership. Your responses are completely anonymous and will be used solely for academic research purposes.*

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### *Section 1: Demographics*

*\*\*\* In which country were you born?*

- ☐ *Kosovo*
- ☐ *Albania*
- ☐ *North Macedonia*

*1. What is your age?*

- ☐ *Under 18*
- ☐ *18-24*
- ☐ *25-34*
- ☐ *35-44*
- ☐ *45-54*
- ☐ *55-64*
- ☐ *65 or older*

*2. What is your gender?*

- ☐ *Male*
- ☐ *Female*
- ☐ *Other*

*3. What is your highest level of education?*

- ☐ *Primary Education*
- ☐ *Secondary Education*
- ☐ *Bachelor's Degree*
- ☐ *Master's Degree*
- ☐ *Doctorate or Higher*

*4. What is your current employment status?*

- ☐ *Employed Full-Time*
- ☐ *Employed Part-Time*

- *Self-Employed*
  - *Unemployed*
  - *Student*
  - *Retired*
  - *Other*
5. *Where do you live?*
- *Urban Area*
  - *Rural Area*

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*Section 2: Economic Expectations*

6. *How do you believe EU membership will impact your country's economy?*
- *Significant Improvement*
  - *Improvement*
  - *No Change*
  - *Deterioration*
  - *Significant Deterioration*
7. *Do you think that EU membership will bring more job opportunities to your country?*
- *Strongly Agree*
  - *Agree*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Disagree*
  - *Strongly Disagree*
8. *What is your main concern about the economic impact of EU membership?*
- *Increased competition from EU companies*
  - *Loss of national economic control*
  - *Unequal distribution of economic benefits*
  - *Higher cost of living*
  - *I have no concerns*
  - *Other*
9. *Do you believe that adopting the euro as your country's currency will positively affect your personal financial situation?*
- *Strongly Agree*
  - *Agree*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Disagree*

- *Strongly Disagree*
- 

### *Section 3: Political Ideology*

*10. How would you describe your political orientation?*

- *Very Liberal*
- *Liberal*
- *Centrist*
- *Conservative*
- *Very Conservative*
- *Other*

*11. To what extent do you agree with the statement: "I generally support the EU's policies and direction"?*

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neutral*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

*12. How important is national sovereignty in your view of EU membership?*

- *Extremely Important*
- *Very Important*
- *Quite Important*
- *Slightly Important*
- *Not Important*

*13. How do you view the impact of EU membership on your country's political system?*

- *Very Positive*
  - *Positive*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Negative*
  - *Very Negative*
- 

### *Section 4: Knowledge and Awareness*

*14. How important is it for you to be informed about the European Union?*

- *Not Important*
- *Rather Not Important*
- *Rather Important*

- *Very Important*

15. *How often do you actively seek information related to the European Union?*

- *Never*
- *Sometimes*
- *Daily*
- *I receive information mainly without actively seeking it*

16. *Why do you want to stay updated with information about the EU?*

- *I do not wish to be informed / I do not actively seek information*
- *It affects my work or education*
- *It affects my personal finances*
- *I like to be informed about public policies in general*
- *It helps me with voting decisions*
- *Other*

17. *How do you acquire your knowledge about the European Union? Please indicate how often you currently use these sources or, if you no longer use them, whether you have used them in the past. If you believe you have no knowledge at all, please select "Never" for all options.*

*For each of the following, select:*

- *Through my education (school, university, courses, etc.)*  
°Never / Sometimes / Daily
- *Through my work*  
°Never / Sometimes / Daily
- *Through membership in organizations (political parties, clubs, etc.)*  
°Never / Sometimes / Daily
- *Through informative profiles and channels on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)*  
°Never / Sometimes / Daily
- *Through news in national media (websites, TV, radio, newspapers)*  
°Never / Sometimes / Daily
- *By watching journalistic TV or radio programs and morning shows on national media*  
°Never / Sometimes / Daily

- *Through discussions with friends and/or family*

°Never / Sometimes / Daily

- *Through news in international media (websites, TV, radio, newspapers)*

°Never / Sometimes / Daily

- *Through official channels of EU institutions*

°Never / Sometimes / Daily

- *Through newspapers and magazines*

°Never / Sometimes / Daily

- *Through other sources not mentioned here*

°Never / Sometimes / Daily

18. *Do you think there is enough easily accessible information to get informed about European trade policy?*

- *I haven't thought about it*
- *Information is easily accessible, but not sufficient or detailed*
- *No, there is not enough information available and it is very difficult to access*
- *There is sufficient information, but it is rather difficult to access*
- *Yes, there is enough information and it is easy to access*

19. *Do you believe you are well-informed about the European Union?*

- *Yes*
- *Rather Yes*
- *Rather No*
- *No*
- *I haven't thought about it*

20. *How would you rate your overall knowledge of the EU and its policies?*

- *Very High*
- *High*
- *Average*
- *Low*
- *Very Low*

21. *Which of the following countries is a member state of the European Union?*

- *Albania*

- *Germany*
  - *North Macedonia*
  - *Norway*
22. *What is the primary function of the European Central Bank (ECB)?*
- *Regulate trade between EU countries*
  - *Set interest rates and maintain price stability in the Eurozone*
  - *Create laws for all EU countries*
  - *Manage the EU's foreign policy*
23. *What is the name of the agreement that governs the relations between your country and the EU?*
- *Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA)*
  - *Treaty of Lisbon*
  - *Schengen Agreement*
  - *Maastricht Treaty*
24. *Who supervises banks in Eurozone countries?*
- *All banks are supervised by the European Central Bank (ECB)*
  - *National banks continue to supervise all banks*
  - *Large banks are supervised by the ECB, while smaller banks remain under national supervision*
  - *I don't know*
25. *Do you believe that greater knowledge about the EU increases support for membership?*
- *Strongly Agree*
  - *Agree*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Disagree*
  - *Strongly Disagree*

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*Section 5: Identity and Cultural Concerns*

26. *How concerned are you that EU membership might harm your country's cultural identity?*
- *Very Concerned*
  - *Concerned*
  - *Neutral*
  - *Not Concerned*
  - *Not Concerned at All*
27. *To what extent do you agree with the statement: "EU membership will strengthen my country's cultural ties with other European countries"?*

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neutral*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

28. *How important is it for your country to preserve its national identity in the context of EU membership?*

- *Extremely Important*
- *Very Important*
- *Quite Important*
- *Slightly Important*
- *Not Important*

29. *Do you believe that EU membership will help protect minority rights in your country?*

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neutral*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

---

#### *Section 6: Overall Opinion on EU Membership*

30. *How supportive are you of your country joining the European Union?*

- *Strongly Support*
- *Support*
- *Neutral*
- *Oppose*
- *Strongly Oppose*

31. *Do you believe that EU membership will bring benefits to your country?*

- *Strongly Agree*
- *Agree*
- *Neutral*
- *Disagree*
- *Strongly Disagree*

32. *If you are given the opportunity, would you vote for your country to join the EU?*

- *Definitely*
- *Probably*

- *Not Sure*
- *Probably Not*
- *Definitely Not*

33. *What is the most important factor influencing your opinion on EU membership?*

- *Economic Benefits*
- *Political Stability*
- *Cultural Identity*
- *Personal Ideology*
- *Knowledge and Awareness*
- *Other*

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### *Conclusion*

*Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your responses will help us better understand public perceptions of EU membership and will contribute to ongoing research in this area. If you have any further questions or would like to know more about the research, please do not hesitate to contact us.*

## Appendix C: Unweighted results

*Table 4.21: Ordered Logistic Regression Results*

| <b>Predictor</b>      | <b>Coefficient (<math>\beta</math>)</b> | <b>Standard Error (SE)</b> | <b>Odds Ratio (<math>\text{Exp}(\beta)</math>)</b> | <b>p-value</b> |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Economic Expectations | 1.35                                    | 0.12                       | 3.86                                               | <0.001         |
| Cultural Concerns     | -0.70                                   | 0.11                       | 0.50                                               | <0.001         |
| Knowledge Levels      | 0.80                                    | 0.15                       | 2.22                                               | <0.001         |
| Political Trust       | 1.10                                    | 0.13                       | 3.00                                               | <0.001         |
| Political Ideology    | 0.35                                    | 0.09                       | 1.42                                               | <0.001         |
| Age                   | -0.02                                   | 0.006                      | 0.98                                               | 0.001          |
| Education Level       | 0.28                                    | 0.07                       | 1.32                                               | <0.001         |
| Gender (Male=1)       | 0.05                                    | 0.09                       | 1.05                                               | 0.580          |
| Urban Residency       | 0.12                                    | 0.11                       | 1.13                                               | 0.280          |

*Source: The data used for this ordered logistic regression was derived from the responses collected through the structured survey conducted for the thesis. This includes demographic information, attitudes*

toward EU membership, and related variables.

*Note: The coefficients ( $\beta$ ) represent the estimated impact of each predictor on support for EU membership. Odds Ratios ( $\text{Exp}(\beta)$ ) indicate the likelihood of higher support levels for a one-unit change in the predictor. P-values indicate statistical significance, with values  $<0.05$  considered significant. Non-significant predictors include Gender and Urban Residency, suggesting they have no measurable impact on EU membership support.*

*Table 4.22: Predicted Probability of 'Strongly Support' EU Membership by Selected Characteristics*

| <b>Subgroup</b>                                                    | <b>Predicted Probability (Strongly Support)</b> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Younger, High Education, High Knowledge, High Trust                | 0.65                                            |
| Older, Low Education, High Cultural Concerns, Low Trust            | 0.15                                            |
| Kosovo, High Economic Expectations, Moderate Knowledge             | 0.50                                            |
| North Macedonia, High Cultural Concerns, Low Economic Expectations | 0.20                                            |
| Albania, High Education, High Trust, Liberal Ideology              | 0.60                                            |

*Source: Author's calculations based on the ordinal probit model estimates.*

*Note: These probabilities are hypothetical examples based on the model's estimates and parameter values. Actual values may differ slightly depending on the exact model specification and mean values of other predictors.*