



## Hybrid Democracies of the Western Balkans

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### Abstract

The governance models of Western Balkan states are now based on a liberal democracy and the development of an open and free economy. In the early 2000s, the European Union was very active in the Western Balkans, strongly promoting democratic values for good governance and strengthening the implementation of the rule of law, democratizing state institutions, with the aim of creating a legal order to protect and respect human rights. Despite the engagement of European Union structures, it is now evident that in some countries of the Western Balkans, there are tendencies towards an authoritarian model of the state, away from a functional system for effective governance. The reasons are mainly due to internal factors and circumstances of the region. The international factor has consistently criticized these governance models being created in some Western Balkan countries, which take the form of hybrid democracies. This form of governance has already established its own status quo and is an approach that is resistant to change, both by international factors and by domestic governmental/political structures. The integration of Western Balkan states into Euro-Atlantic institutions, especially the European Union, remains the main topic of discussion for key leaders, not only within the region but also among the main leaders of the European Union member countries. Integration is a complex process that requires mutual cooperation. On the one hand, serious commitment is required from Western Balkan countries to meet the conditionality criteria, and on the other hand, the European Union must be willing to undertake concrete initiatives for their inclusion. These initiatives may also require reforms within the structures of the European Union. Diplomatically, initially, traditional bilateral relations were seen as the most reliable alternative to achieve Euro-Atlantic integration, which the Western Balkan countries aspire to so much. Despite numerous efforts, the Western Balkan countries now feel "fatigued" from the long wait, resulting from difficult conditions and technicalities. The governance of the region's countries is under constant pressure from bureaucracy and the weakness in decision-making of European Union institutions, as well as from the constraints and conditions applied over the years. This situation has led to an "internal upheaval" both within the political class and the civil society of Western Balkan countries. High-ranking political leaders of some Western Balkan countries have now taken joint political initiatives with regional significance. Based on the various developments in a complex region such as the Western Balkans, this paper aims to present the implications that may arise in the Euro-Atlantic integration process from the involvement of actors with different geo-strategic interests.

**Keywords:** Western Balkans, European Union, Geo-Strategic Actors, Euro-Atlantic Integration, Governance of Regional States

### 1. Introduction

Since 1990, the efforts of the EU to gradually open its borders have been oriented towards a group of transition countries with which it has signed association agreements. The goal was to support democratization and economic transformation in these countries. Changes in the geopolitical map of Europe required the expansion of economic areas towards the

East and Southeast. Integration should not be misunderstood as merely elimination of borders, which would enable free movement towards European countries. Integration into the EU primarily entails the alignment and embrace of the fundamental values upon which this large intergovernmental organization is built and operates democracy, the rule of law, the protection of human rights, and the protection and respect of minority rights.<sup>51</sup>

The integration of the Western Balkans is a process that requires cooperation. On the one hand, it requires the Western Balkan countries to meet the conditionality criteria set, and on the other hand, the EU is expected to be ready to undertake such a step, which naturally also requires reforms within the EU structures.

Currently, the candidate status can only be granted through unanimous voting. However, the European Parliament has recently initiated an extensive reform process, aiming to abandon the principle of unanimous decision-making in all policy areas.

Today, the Western Balkan countries, their peoples, and their leaders are aware of the necessity of development stemming from the desire to achieve the standards that will pave the way for the region's European integration, namely, integration into the structures of a Union that challenges the old history of wars and conflicts and demonstrates to the world that Europeans know and are building their own new history. European integration means democratization, development, and well-being. The Western Balkan countries have been exposed to the problems and inconsistencies of EU countries, as well as to various possibilities regarding the speed of integration of these countries.

Based on the Stabilization and Association Agreement, as a perspective towards the European Union, each Western Balkan state has been offered preferential trade agreements, financial assistance, and help with progress in processes of democratization, political dialogue, and institution-building. Each state has the obligation to align with a package of EU measures designed to foster political, institutional, and economic reforms.

The term "democratization" describes a political process; just like democracy, it is not something static but rather an ongoing transformation. The establishment of democratic institutions remains one of the greatest challenges for Western Balkan countries, as well as the consolidation of democracy in societies that have gone through democratic transitions.

Democratic governance is inconceivable without the existence of free and competitive elections, but political elections cannot guarantee the realization of democratic governance. Liberal democracy is characterized, among others, by the rule of law, free political elections, the separation of powers, and the protection and guarantee of political, personal, and social liberties. Democratization can be defined as the process leading to the realization of democracy. It is a complex political, social, and cultural transformation that has undergone various developments in different countries and historical contexts. However, it has become clear from European institutions that the progress of Balkan countries' integration depends on how willing they are to pursue a post-nationalist strategy, improving regional connections and cooperation, guaranteeing minority rights, where economic capacity and trust in collective security, the well-being of the community of nations, and building a safer and more prosperous future, are ensured. The relationship between economic and political integration may vary on a case-by-case basis. Intra-regional economic integration within a state takes on the features of national economic-political integration. However, political integration may succeed while economic integration may fail. The processes of economic and political integration in the European Union have been linked since their inception. These processes have been intertwined from the beginning, not only due to historical reasons but also as a result of the perceived threat from the communist camp and the Cold War that was taking place during that period.

Since progress has been made in stability issues, Western Balkan countries will begin to increase their attention and focus on the reforms needed to achieve European standards. The economic and social agenda will be a priority, as there are significant complex problems present due to weak economies, such as high unemployment and inadequate social cohesion. EU policies for the region should focus more on fair and continuous economic development and also on expanding the benefits of economic growth for the poor, combating unemployment, social exclusion, discrimination, and improving social dialogue.<sup>52</sup>

The Western Balkan region has historically been a battleground for major global political powers. Great powers have competitively sought territories to gain the support of the population and establish a foothold in the region to promote their values. The highly heterogeneous population of the Western Balkans is connected to the occupiers and religious

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Piazolo, *The integration Process between Eastern and Western Europe*, Heidelberg, f. 5-7 dhe European Council, Conclusions of the Presidency, Copenhagen, June 1993.

<sup>52</sup> *The Western Balkans on the road to the EU: consolidating stability and raising prosperity*, Communication from the Commission, 27 January 2006, COM(2006) 27 final.

<sup>3</sup> Hanna Smith and Cristina Juola, *Hybrid CoE Trend Report*, 2 MARCH 2020 "Western Balkans", (EDS),.

influences that have left their marks in history. Considering the significant mix of Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim faiths, the region as a whole remains European in its mindset.<sup>53</sup> Through the promotion of democratic values, good governance, and respect for human rights, the European Union has been more actively involved in the Western Balkans since the early 2000s, assisting the countries in the region through the democratization of state institutions, strengthening the rule of law, contributing to regional stability and peace. Perhaps the most prominent feature of the situation in the Balkans was the security vacuum, both internally and externally, which was filled by the international community. Two approaches stood out from the international community: problem-solving from above and focusing on borders and external security. The policies employed included diplomacy, supported by threats of bombardment or sanctions.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, the international community made it clear that it was willing to be present in the region for as long as necessary to achieve a sustainable political agreement.

As part of the Stability Pact, the international community also developed proposals for common security agreements for the region as a whole, which would enhance security, cut expenses, curtail smuggling, and enable joint institutions to resolve conflicts. Disputes between states, weak socio-economic conditions, and organized crime are all sources of instability in the region. Societies with such instability are prone to external influence, with external factors using these destabilizing elements to pursue their own agendas in the region. Border agreements and disagreements regarding the legal status of specific territories constitute an ongoing source of instability in the region. This indicates that the potential for security threats in the region persists, even for the EU and NATO, and the resolution of border disputes has become a wide-ranging political issue. To hinder regional development, external actors may provoke tensions through local disagreements and claim to maintain control and destabilize the region.

The socio-economic aspect is a key factor in instability. An evident weakness of the Balkan countries, as well as the entire region, is their weak economic condition and growing public debt. National economies lack sufficient funds to implement long-term changes that could improve the situation as required by the EU, while the financial support offered by the EU has been insufficient.

Low living standards, high unemployment, and skilled workers seeking opportunities for emigration have contributed to this trend while hoping to achieve better education, employment opportunities, and a higher standard of living. Young people are also seeking jobs beyond the region. This also indicates the difficulties encountered in achieving a healthy democratization process.

Around 25% of the population in the region has emigrated to countries with more developed economies, including Turkey and neighboring EU states.<sup>55</sup> One of the weaknesses related to economic structures is corruption, to which state institutions are prone, hindering the development and functioning of culture of law and the legal system. Corruption is a disease in many states in the region. The elites have benefited from it, and it is an integral part of the socio-economic situation in the region.

## 2. Conclusion

In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, it is essential for Europe, at a political level, to respond to calls throughout the region to accelerate integration into the EU. A revitalized accession process would promote progress in much-needed governance and rule of law reforms in these countries.

While the EU with its bureaucracy, is reluctant to continue the accession process for Western Balkan countries, authoritarian states are already challenging and will continue to challenge the EU values and the operational environment in the region. This implies a potential geo-political competition between Russia and China in the Balkans. This is a proper illustration of how the region still functions as a battleground for major powers, where Western Balkan states are not treated as full-fledged partners in bilateral agreements.

The economic crisis that has affected the entire European and American continents, related to the war in Ukraine, may lead to a reduction in defense spending, which could inevitably result in cuts or withdrawals of international presence of NATO countries in crisis-stricken regions such as the Western Balkans.

The aforementioned factors may shift the focus of NATO and the EU to concentrate more on the Baltic countries and the crisis in Ukraine, diminishing the importance of the Western Balkans and relegating it to a secondary or tertiary priority.

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<sup>54</sup>Daianu D., "Vitaliteti ekonomik dhe realizueshmëria: Një sfidë e dyfishtë për sigurinë Europiane, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1996

<sup>55</sup> Hanna Smith and Cristina Juola Hybrid CoE Trend Report, 2 MARCH 2020 "Western Balkans", (EDS.), faqe 16.

The situation appears even more pessimistic when considering the crisis within the EU itself and its hesitation regarding enlargement into Western Balkan countries. The hesitation of the EU is compounded by the fact that some of its member states considered the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Union as a mistake, as their economic standards and internal problems related to corruption and the rule of law were below EU standards.

The gas crisis, fuel shortages, and grain shortages related to the war in Ukraine have made the situation even more difficult, especially for the Western Balkans as non-EU member states. Analysts' voices predicting a prolonged conflict in Ukraine make the integration of Western Balkan countries even more necessary since, in addition to other positive elements, it would bring greater stability and security in monetary and defense aspects.

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