EU MEMBERSHIP OF WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP PRACTICES

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Abstract

Following the end of the Cold War, the European Union's interest in the Western Balkans intensified, driven by geopolitical and geostrategic considerations. Moreover, the region holds significance as a transit route for energy lines supplying EU member states. Encompassing a diverse geographical expanse, the Western Balkans includes Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, North Macedonia, Romania, Greece, and Slovenia. While the EU's perspectives on the Balkan countries, situated in a geopolitically crucial position, became clearer following the Thessaloniki Summit 2003, they are currently grappling with various challenges. Within the EU, enlargement fatigue has emerged following the enlargements in 2007 and 2013. Concurrently, economic and political crises within the union have prompted restructuring efforts. These reforms, encompassing areas such as the "Rule of Law", "Functioning Market Economy" and "Democratization and Transparency of Public Administration", have become imperative amid the evolving global order and globalization trends. Consequently, reforms in digital citizenship have also become inevitable. This study examines the EU membership and digital citizenship practices of the Western Balkan countries.

Keywords EU, Western Balkans, Digital Citizenship

JEL Codes: F50, F51, F53

BATI BALKAN ÜLKELERİNİN AB ÜYELİKLERİ VE DİJİTAL VATANDAŞLIK UYGULAMALARI

Öz

Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesinin ardından Avrupa Birliği'nin Batı Balkanlar'a ilgisi hem jeopolitik hem de jeostratejik kaygıların etkisiyle yoğunlaşmıştır. Ayrıca bölge, AB üyesi ülkelere enerji sağlayan enerji hatlarının geçiş güzergahı olarak da önem taşımaktadır. Çok çeşitli bir coğrafi alanı kapsayan Batı Balkanlar'da Hırvatistan, Bosna-Hersek, Karadağ, Bulgaristan, Arnavutluk, Kosova, Sırbistan, Kuzey Makedonya, Romanya, Yunanistan ve Slovenya gibi ülkeler yer almaktadır. Jeopolitik açıdan önemli bir konumda bulunan Batı Balkan ülkelerinin 2003 yılındaki Selanik Zirvesinden sonra AB perspektifleri önemli ölçüde netleşmiş olsa da günümüzde bazı sorunlarla karşı karşıya kalmışlardır. Avrupa Birliğinde, 2007 ve 2013 yılındaki genişlemelerden sonra genişleme yorgunluğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Birliğin içinde var olan ekonomik ve siyasi krizler birliği yeniden yapılandırmaya yönlendirmiştir. Bu yeniden yapılandırma dijital vatandaşlık alanındaki reformlara da yansımıştır. AB'nin önemli reformlarından olan "Hukukun Üstünlüğü", "İşleyen Piyasa Ekonomisi", "Demokratikleşme", "Kamu Yönetiminin Şeffaf ve Saydam Olması" gibi reformların yanı sıra değişen dünya düzeninin ve küreselleşmenin etkisiyle dijital vatandaşlık reformları da kaçınılmaz hale gelmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı Batı Balkan ülkelerinin AB'ye üyelikleri ve dijital vatandaşlık uygulamalarını incelemektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: AB, Batı Balkanlar, Dijital Vatandaşlık

JEL Kodları: F50, F51, F53

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1. Introduction

Farmer defines digital citizenship as the capacity of an informed citizen to utilize technology in a secure, accountable, discerning, and efficient manner (Farmer, 2011). This definition underscores the distinctiveness of digital citizenship from traditional citizenship. At the same time, traditional citizenship emphasizes membership within a state, and digital citizenship centers on adept navigation and utilization of the digital realm in a secure, beneficial, and efficient manner.

Digital inclusion refers to the comprehensive involvement of individuals in electronic society. Its objective is to ensure equal access to technology for all and advocate for universal digital tools access. E-commerce entails the electronic trade of goods. Digital citizens are cognizant of the risks and vulnerabilities associated with conducting transactions in the digital realm and take necessary precautions. Digital communication encompasses the electronic exchange of information within a digital landscape. Digital citizens are proficient in using digital platforms to interact with others and disseminate information digitally. Digital literacy entails the process of acquiring knowledge and skills related to digital technologies and their utilization. Digital citizens are mindful of both the positive and negative aspects of technology, demonstrate a willingness to adapt to new technologies, and seek relevant training when necessary. Digital ethics refers to the standards and guidelines of conduct applicable in the digital sphere. Digital citizens prioritize and respect both local and global values when utilizing digital technologies. Digital legality involves assuming legal responsibility for activities and transactions conducted in the digital domain. Digital citizens understand the behaviors that may constitute digital crimes and acknowledge the legal ramifications thereof (Öztürk, 2021: 386).

Amidst the onset of the pandemic, the phenomenon of digitalization has significantly heightened its influence across various spheres of life. It has emerged as a pivotal factor directly impacting the lives of individuals, communities, and nations alike. Consequently, discussions surrounding the potential impact of digitalization on the concept of human rights have garnered increasing significance within the legal domain. Human rights, which wield undeniable influence over the evolution of law in general, and contemporary legal frameworks in particular, are now subject to scrutiny regarding their compatibility with the digital landscape (Çatlı & Keskin, 2021: 200).

Digital entitlements and obligations pertain to the entitlements that individuals possess in the digital realm, provided they do not infringe upon the rights and liberties of others. Digital participants bear diverse rights and duties, such as confidentiality and freedom of speech. Digital wellness denotes the physical and mental well-being of individuals within the digital sphere. Digital citizens must prioritize ergonomic practices when engaging with digital tools and steer clear of circumstances that may jeopardize their well-being. Digital integrity encompasses the state of being vigilant against security risks in the digital arena and implementing necessary safeguards. Digital citizens are knowledgeable about and utilize digital technologies to mitigate security risks (Öztürk, 2021: 386).

Due to these factors and the influence of globalization, the adoption of digital citizenship principles persists in the Western Balkan nations, mirroring trends worldwide. Throughout this evolution, the alignment efforts of the Western Balkan nations with the EU persist in parallel. Since the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, during which the EU reaffirmed its commitment to the accession of Balkan countries, only Croatia has successfully joined the EU. Croatia is set to further integrate into the Eurozone and Schengen Area next year. While Croatia's accession marks a positive development for the region, it is evident that a significant gap has emerged between Croatia and its Western Balkan neighbors since joining the EU.

Against this backdrop, the inaugural EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tirana holds particular significance, symbolizing the EU's dedication to the region amidst evolving European dynamics. The summit has provided a valuable platform for the EU and Western Balkan nations to bolster security and stability, enhance collective responses, engage in political dialogue, and reinforce enlargement policies, especially in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

However, for this newfound momentum in EU-Balkan relations to yield lasting success, the EU must refrain from solely leveraging the current geopolitical context to mitigate the worsening cooperation environment within the region. Since the cessation of conflicts in the former Yugoslavia,

reliance on outdated approaches to unresolved disputes-treated more as a consequence than a cause-has often relegated the EU to a reactive role. To ensure sustained progress, the EU must adopt a proactive stance, addressing underlying issues rather than merely responding to their outcomes.

As a civilian power, the EU carried out important work on behalf of reconstruction in the former Yugoslav states. This therefore shows why it has been successful in influencing the economic and political systems in these countries (Arıkan, 2009: 19).

In 2004, the EU also initiated its European Neighbourhood Policy to foster closer engagement with and offer increased economic support to neighboring countries in the east and south. This policy was designed to enhance cooperation and promote stability and prosperity in the EU's neighboring regions. In the realm of military affairs, endeavors were undertaken to advance multilateral peacekeeping efforts. These initiatives primarily focused on regions such as the Western Balkans, aiming to bolster security and cooperation in these strategic areas (Cottey, 2009: 10).

The 1999 Kosovo war prompted the establishment of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe. These initiatives were founded on the belief that countries in the region shared common legacies resulting from the Yugoslav wars, as well as facing similar political, economic, and social challenges. Consequently, it was believed that addressing these challenges would be most effective through sub-regional cooperation. Furthermore, there was an implicit objective to reintegrate Serbia, which had become isolated due to its involvement in the Yugoslav wars, back into the sub-regional and European community of states. This move aimed to rationalize and streamline cooperation efforts, providing a more cohesive approach to addressing the region's challenges (Cottey, 2009: 10-11).

Therefore, the states of Federal Yugoslavia aspired to replicate this model. The rise of ultra-nationalism and interethnic tensions, rooted in religious and cultural differences, fostered a profound sense of alienation, leading to a belief that coexistence was no longer tenable. Consequently, in June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia proclaimed their independence, anticipating complete diplomatic acknowledgment as sovereign countries from the international community (Batır, 2005: 262).

2. Digitalization Agenda of Western Balkan Countries

The commencement of EU membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the attainment of candidate status by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo's application for membership, and the EU's decision on visa liberalization with Kosovo-effective no later than January 1, 2024-serve as tangible evidence of a renewed momentum in relations between the EU and the Balkans amid turbulent times. This resurgence is further underscored by the convening of two summits, particularly the Tirana summit between the EU and the Western Balkans. Notably, this summit revitalized the Berlin Process and advocated for the regional economic integration of six Balkan countries, positioning them for eventual integration into the EU market.

During the Digital Assembly held in Sofia, Bulgaria in 2018, the European Commission (EC) unveiled the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans. This initiative aims to bolster the EU's transition to a digital economy and amplify the benefits of digital transformation, including accelerated economic growth, job creation, and enhanced service provision. The agenda outlines five primary priorities: reducing roaming costs, expanding broadband access, fortifying the digital economy and society, facilitating the digitization of industries, and enforcement of EU regulations. Studies are conducted in close collaboration with governments in the region and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).

The concept of the digital state, characterized by public administration's endeavors to effectively employ digital technologies to deliver public services, represents an advancement beyond e-government. It has garnered significant attention in various texts related to public administration within the EU.

In the 2000s, studies on e-government and digital cohesion gained significant momentum and were extensively documented by the European Union. One such document, "The European Digital Forum Government of the Future: How Digital Technology Will Change the Way We Live, Work and Govern," provides valuable insights into the concept of the digital state. This study, titled "How Future State Digital Technology Will Change Our Lives, Work Life, and Management Style," serves as a

framework for understanding the digital state. It highlights the transition from a single-actor to a multi-actor paradigm as being essential in the context of digital transformation (Demiral, 2018: 77).

The recognition of this situation has become a focal point in the e-government policies of both EU and EFTA member countries in recent times. During a meeting held in October 2017, attended by responsible ministers, the necessary factors for addressing this issue were outlined as follows: (Demiral, 2018: 77)

1.) The world is undergoing rapid changes, facing significant social, economic, and political challenges. In response, the Union aims to address the needs of its citizens by prioritizing digital services.

2.) Despite significant strides made by the EU and its member states in modernizing service delivery, it is acknowledged that the desired level of modernization has not yet been fully attained. The profound impact of digital transformation, both within the EU and its member states, underscores the importance of achieving comprehensive, user-friendly digital services across all sectors.

3.) The digital state emphasizes transparency and accountability, fostering trust within the framework of governance.

4.) Knowledge will be pivotal to the future economy, with the free movement of knowledge emerging as a fundamental right. Hence, active participation in the development of the Digital Single Market is crucial. Additionally, the digital state is expected to drive economic growth, boost employment, and streamline production processes by reducing bureaucratic barriers.

5.) Digital transformation is a collective responsibility that necessitates cooperation. Accelerating cross-border collaboration, both within the Union and between countries, is imperative to effectively navigate this transformation (Ministerial Declaration, 2017: 1).

The EU-backed Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans, alongside national digital strategies, continues to bolster the region's shift toward a digital economy, aiming to harness the advantages of digital transformation. The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans (2021-2027) is poised to amplify progress in digitalization and human capital, leveraging flagship initiatives such as the Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans and the Youth Guarantee (European Training Foundation, 2023: 7).

3. Relations of the Western Balkan Countries with the EU

EU membership is important for many Western Balkan countries. Here are the relations of some Western Balkan countries with the EU:

3.1. Albania

Albania, situated in the Western Balkans region, declared its independence in 1912. It shares borders with Greece to the south, North Macedonia to the east, Kosovo to the northeast, and Montenegro to the north. Albania has made significant strides in its EU membership process. It was designated as a potential candidate country following the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. In 2018, the European Commission recommended that Albania commence accession negotiations. Subsequently, in June 2019, the EU General Affairs Council announced that negotiations could begin, contingent upon Albania meeting certain criteria. The accession negotiations officially commenced on 25th March 2020, following an Intergovernmental Conference held on 19th July 2020.

Albania has benefitted from visa liberalization since December 2010, following the entry into force of the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement. Additionally, Albania became a member of NATO in 2009. These developments underscore Albania's aspirations for closer integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions and its commitment to fostering regional stability and cooperation.

Following the positive opinion of the commission, the negotiation process regarding Albania and North Macedonia started. Although there was a delay in this process due to the problems between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, the accession negotiations process officially started in July 2022 (European Parliament, The Western Balkans Report, Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2024: 3).

3.2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence following the bloody conflicts and wars that occurred during the dissolution of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. At the Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted potential candidate status for EU membership. The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) between the EU and Bosnia and Herzegovina, signed in 2008, came into force on June 1, 2015. Subsequently, Bosnia and Herzegovina applied for EU membership on February 15, 2016.

A detailed roadmap was outlined in the Enlargement Strategy Document prepared in 2019 to guide Bosnia and Herzegovina's path towards EU accession. Additionally, the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement, which is effective from January 1, 2008, has allowed Bosnia and Herzegovina to benefit from visa liberalization since December 2010. Similar to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a member of NATO but has participated in the Partnership for Peace Program since December 14, 2006. These developments reflect Bosnia and Herzegovina's ongoing efforts to enhance cooperation with Euro-Atlantic institutions and to advance its integration process with the European Union.

Following the Commission's positive opinion regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina, it proposed to start accession negotiations in November 2023 (European Parliament, The Western Balkans Report, Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2024: 3). This recommendation marks a significant step forward in Bosnia and Herzegovina's journey towards European Union membership, contingent upon the country's continued efforts to meet the criteria set forth by the EU for accession.

3.3. Bulgaria

Bulgaria, a Western Balkan country, became a member of the European Union on January 1, 2007. Its capital city is Sofia, and the country is currently in the process of integrating into the Schengen Area. Governed by a parliamentary democracy, Bulgaria comprises 27 provinces and 1 metropolitan city, Sofia. With a total of 17 members in the European Parliament, Bulgaria actively participates in EU legislative processes. Representatives of the Bulgarian government regularly engage in decision-making and coordination of EU laws at the European Council (EC). Additionally, Bulgaria held the rotating presidency of the EU Council between January and June 2018, during which it played a key role in setting the agenda for Council meetings across various policy areas.

Bulgaria is represented by 12 members of the European Economic and Social Committee, which serves as an advisory body providing input on EU legislative proposals to ensure regional perspectives are considered. Furthermore, Bulgaria has 12 representatives in the European Committee of the Regions, which serves as the assembly representing regional and local interests within the EU. This body offers consultation on legislative proposals to ensure they reflect the interests of each EU region.

3.4. Croatia

After the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Croatia declared its independence in 1991. Before independence, Croatia adopted a new constitution on December 22, 1990. Following the changing global landscape after the Cold War, many Western Balkan countries, including Croatia, shifted their focus towards EU membership. Croatia signed the Partnership for Peace Agreement on May 25, 2000, and subsequently joined the World Trade Organization on November 30, 2000. On October 29, 2001, Croatia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU, marking a significant step towards EU integration. Croatia officially applied for EU membership in 2003, gaining candidate country status in 2004 and commencing accession negotiations in 2005. The accession negotiations were successfully concluded, and Croatia signed the accession agreement with the EU on December 9, 2011. Following the resolution of border disputes with Slovenia, Croatia overcame the remaining obstacles to EU membership.

In 2011, a nationwide referendum saw the majority of Croatians voting in favor of EU membership. With the successful conclusion of accession negotiations, Croatia officially became an EU member on July 1, 2013. With its accession, Croatia became the last country among the Western Balkan countries to join the EU. Furthermore, Croatia became a member of NATO on April 1, 2009.

Additionally, Croatia assumed the presidency of the UN Security Council from December 2008 to 2009, further contributing to its international engagement and diplomacy efforts.

3.5. Montenegro

Montenegro is situated on the Adriatic coast of the Balkans, bordered by Croatia and the Adriatic Sea to the west, Albania to the southeast, Kosovo to the east, Serbia to the northeast, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the north. Following a referendum held on May 21, 2006, the majority of Montenegrin citizens voted for independence, leading to the separation of Montenegro from Serbia and its establishment as an independent country. Montenegro formally applied for EU membership on December 15, 2008, shortly after declaring independence. The European Commission positively assessed Montenegro's application in 2010, highlighting the need for progress in priority areas. Subsequently, Montenegro was granted candidate status for EU membership on December 17, 2010. Accession negotiations officially commenced on June 29, 2012.

Additionally, Montenegro has benefitted from visa liberalization since 2009, facilitating travel to EU countries for its citizens. Moreover, Montenegro became a member of NATO in 2017, further solidifying its Euro-Atlantic integration and security cooperation efforts.

Although all 33 negotiation chapters examined so far in the negotiations with Montenegro have been opened, three of them have been temporarily closed. However, despite all these efforts, Montenegro has faced political instability, especially in recent years (European Parliament, The Western Balkans Report, Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2024: 5). These issues have caused delays and setbacks in Montenegro's efforts to fulfill the requirements and progress further in its negotiations with the European Union.

3.6. Kosovo

Unlike other Western Balkan countries, Kosovo possesses a unique status known as "sui generis." Following the conflicts in 1999 and NATO intervention, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence in 2008. However, Kosovo's independence is not accepted by 5 EU member states, namely Spain, Greece, the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus (GCA), Romania, and Slovakia. These countries express concerns that recognizing Kosovo's independence may set a precedent for similar separatist movements within their borders in the future. Despite these challenges, Kosovo's path towards EU integration was opened with the Council Decision in 2008. Subsequently, negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) between the EU and Kosovo took place between 2013 and 2014, culminating in its signing in 2015. The SAA, which came into force on April 1, 2016, holds great significance for Kosovo as it necessitates the implementation of EU reforms and adherence to EU standards. Notably, this agreement is the first SAA signed by the EU after the Lisbon Treaty and grants Kosovo the legal personality of the EU. Another crucial aspect of Kosovo's relations with the EU is the visa liberalization dimension. On September 13, 2018, the European Parliament approved the decision to allow visa-free travel for Kosovo citizens to EU countries. This decision is expected to take effect on January 1, 2024, marking a significant milestone in Kosovo's integration with the European Union.

The solution to the political problems between Kosovo and Serbia and the continuation of the dialogue process between the two countries continue to be linked to the integration process. Both countries have not yet started to implement their obligations, which begin in early 2023 and aim to revitalize the dialogue process. (European Parliament, The Western Balkans Report, Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2024: 4-5).

3.7. North Macedonia

North Macedonia was recognized as a potential candidate country by the EU following the Thessaloniki Summit. The country applied for EU membership on March 22, 2004. Notably, North Macedonia was the first among the Western Balkan countries to sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU. Additionally, it was the second country in the Western Balkans to be granted candidate status in 2005, after Croatia. However, accession negotiations with the EU faced significant delays due to the longstanding name issue of North Macedonia. Greece had opposed North Macedonia's EU and NATO membership aspirations, citing concerns over the name dispute. This issue was resolved when Greece and North Macedonia reached an agreement on June 12, 2018, to change the

country's name to the "Republic of North Macedonia." With the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, the barriers to North Macedonia's EU and NATO membership were lifted.

Subsequently, in June 2019, it was announced that the Republic of North Macedonia could commence negotiations with the EU. The EU General Affairs Council decided to initiate accession negotiations with North Macedonia on March 25, 2020. Consequently, the first Intergovernmental Conference was held on July 19, 2022, marking the beginning of the screening process.

Furthermore, the Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement between North Macedonia and the EU came into force on January 1, 2008, enabling visa liberalization for North Macedonian citizens since January 2009. Following the resolution of the name issue and the signing of the Prespa Agreement, North Macedonia's path to becoming a member of the EU and NATO was cleared. As a result, North Macedonia joined NATO on March 27, 2020.

Due to the disagreement on historical and political issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, it has created significant obstacles to the progress of accession negotiations. Despite all this, accession negotiations with North Macedonia started in 2022 (European Parliament, The Western Balkans Report, Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2024: 4).

3.8. Romania

Romania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire on May 9, 1877, and was governed as a monarchy until 1947. Following World War II, Romania was ruled as a communist republic under the influence of the Soviet Union. However, with the changing political landscape globally in 1989, Romania underwent a transition to a semi-presidential democratic system. This period marked a significant shift in Romania's political and economic trajectory. In line with developments in the region, Romania also pursued EU membership, joining NATO in 2004. As one of the Balkan countries, Romania became an EU member in 2007, alongside Bulgaria, through the EU enlargement process. Despite their EU membership, Romania and Bulgaria have yet to be admitted to the Schengen Area, a situation that has been a subject of debate. While the European Commission has stated that both countries have fulfilled the necessary technical requirements for Schengen membership, the European Parliament has criticized the delay as "discrimination." However, the admission of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen Area requires unanimous approval from all EU member states.

Moreover, Romania and Bulgaria have been subject to the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) since 2007. This mechanism evaluates their progress in combating corruption, money laundering, and judicial reforms. The CVM serves as a framework to monitor and support Romania and Bulgaria in their efforts to strengthen the rule of law and judicial independence.

3.9. Serbia

Serbia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU on November 7, 2007. Subsequently, Serbia applied for EU membership on December 2, 2009. Following a positive opinion from the European Commission, Serbia was granted candidate status on March 1, 2012. However, the European Commission outlined the normalization of relations with Kosovo and progress in the Pristina-Belgrade Dialogue as prerequisites for the commencement of accession negotiations. After the signing of the agreement on the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia on April 19, 2013, accession negotiations with Serbia were decided to commence on June 28, 2013. The negotiation process officially began with a decision made on January 21, 2014. Within the framework of the negotiation process, a total of 22 chapters were opened, with two temporarily closed.

An integral aspect of the EU integration process for Serbia is visa liberalization. Serbia has enjoyed visa liberalization since December 2009 under the agreement. Despite not being a member of NATO, Serbia has been included in the Partnership for Peace Program since December 14, 2006. This participation signifies Serbia's commitment to cooperation and security collaboration with NATO member states.

Serbia's negotiation process is similar to Kosovo. It is related to the parties reaching an agreement by resolving their existing political problems and continuing the dialogue process. However, these

countries have not yet started to implement the revised agreement in 2023. (European Parliament, The Western Balkans Report, Fact Sheets on the European Union, 2024: 5).

3.10. Slovenia

Slovenia, formerly part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, declared its independence from the federation on June 25, 1991. Situated in the south of Central Europe, Slovenia embarked on its path towards European integration. With the EU enlargement in 2004, Slovenia became a member of the European Union on May 1, 2004. Notably, it was the first country from the dissolved Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to achieve EU membership. Croatia followed suit, becoming a member in 2013 during the latest EU enlargement.

The Copenhagen Summit held in 2002 marked a pivotal moment in EU enlargement. At this summit, negotiations with several countries, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, the Greek Cypriot Administration, and Malta, were successfully concluded. These countries officially joined the EU on May 1, 2004, signaling a significant expansion of the European Union.

3.11. Greece

Greece, situated in the Western Balkans, was part of the second wave of EU enlargement. In 1961, Greece signed an association agreement with the EU, but this relationship was interrupted due to a military coup taking control of the administration. Following the end of military rule in 1974, Greece transitioned to democratic governance, prompting its application for EU membership in 1975. However, Greece's bid for EU membership encountered skepticism regarding its economic, political, and social readiness. During this period, concerns arose within EU member states about Greece's political and economic stability, as well as doubts about its alignment with the common values shared by other member states.

After six years of negotiations, EU member states eventually embraced a more positive stance toward Greece's membership. They argued that integrating Greece into the union could foster its economic and political development and enhance democratization efforts within the country. Consequently, Greece officially became a full member of the EU on January 1, 1981.

Table 1. Population rates and membership dates of the Western Balkan countries that are members of the EU

Country	Population	Year of EU Accession
Bulgaria	6,827,736	2007
Croatia	4,169,239	2013
Romania	18,326,327	2007
Slovenia	2,099,790	2004
Greece	10,497,595	1981

Source:https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/population/country comparison/(18.07.2023).

Chart 1: Population rates and membership dates of the Western Balkan countries that are members of the EU
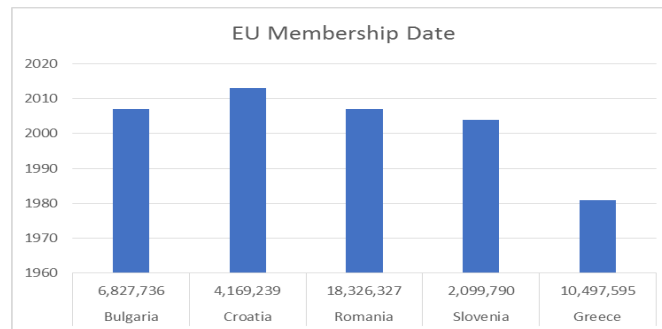
Source:https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/population/country comparison/(18.07.2023).

In this chart, the population ratios of the Balkan countries that are members of the EU and the years they became members of the EU are included. As it seems, except for Greece, the membership of the Balkan countries took place with the Fifth and Sixth Enlargements. Therefore, the Fifth and Sixth Enlargements are important for the Balkan countries. As can be seen in the table, Greece became the first member of the EU in 1981 among the Western Balkan countries. Later, Slovenia became an EU member in 2004, and Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Croatia most recently became an EU member in 2013. After the Sixth Enlargement, the enlargement stopped due to the existing economic and social problems in the EU. Today, the EU is facing enlargement fatigue. As depicted in the table, Greece became the first Western Balkan country to join the EU in 1981. Subsequently, Slovenia joined in 2004, followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Croatia was the most recent addition, becoming an EU member in 2013. Following the Sixth Enlargement, EU expansion halted, primarily due to economic and social challenges within the EU. Currently, the EU is experiencing "enlargement fatigue."

5. Conclusions

With the advent of globalization, digitalization has become an integral aspect of contemporary life. E-government applications employed in bureaucratic processes hold significant importance as they streamline procedures, reduce bureaucratic hurdles, and offer expedited services. Western Balkan countries are actively embracing these applications to align with global technological advancements. Digitization has profoundly reshaped our daily routines and the global landscape, where information flows swiftly and seamlessly. This paradigm shift presents a myriad of possibilities, chiefly in expediting cumbersome administrative processes, catalyzing economic growth, propelling technological advancement, promoting wider inclusivity, and, paramountly, catalyzing societal metamorphosis.

One of the primary obstacles facing many Western Balkan countries is the establishment of education and training systems that meet the demands for new skills. Therefore, collaborative efforts among governmental entities, institutions of higher education, and training providers must be coordinated to cultivate the workforce skills necessary to initiate and achieve digital transformation across various companies and industries, thereby ensuring their economic prosperity. It is essential to implement continuous learning and customized training programs focused on digital and business skills as prerequisites for enhancing skills and maintaining workforce competitiveness and economic growth (Majkovski et al., 2019: 53).

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the importance of digitalization in bureaucratic procedures. Presently, citizens in Albania can access their documents via the e-Albania portal, a convenience also extended to citizens in Serbia and Moldova. Moreover, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro have undertaken noteworthy studies on this subject, reflecting their commitment to harnessing digitalization to enhance administrative efficiency and citizen services.

A prerequisite for the advancement of new forms of digital employment is the adequate digital proficiency of the populace. Data indicates varying levels of digital skills across the region, with Serbia and Montenegro demonstrating stronger performance in both fundamental and advanced digital skills.

Kosovo leads the region in the proportion of individuals with advanced digital skills. Nonetheless, substantial portions of the Western Balkans population lack digital skills relative to the EU. Basic digital competencies are notably lower in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia compared to the EU-27 (European Training Foundation, 2023: 12).

In addition to its goals of achieving economic, political, and military unity, the European Union is also actively involved in initiatives to promote digital unity. These efforts are aimed at facilitating the transparent, accountable, and rapid delivery of high-quality services influenced by the forces of globalization. In parallel with global digital trends, there is an increasing demand among stakeholders for the establishment of a Digital Single Market within the EU. These developments underline the importance of digitalization as a key agenda item for the EU in the foreseeable future. The EU membership processes and digital citizenship practices of the Western Balkan countries continue to remain up-to-date. It seems that we will see that the efforts of the Western Balkan countries towards digital citizenship processes will increase even more in the coming period. In this context, studies have accelerated in many Western Balkan countries in recent years. At the same time, the establishment of the Digital Single Market, which will be valid not only for the Western Balkan countries but also for the whole world, is also among the possibilities soon.

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