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## THE EU - BALKANS ENLARGEMENT PROCESS DEADLOCK: THE ROLE OF PERCEPTIONS, STABILITOCRACY, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Abstract:** *The EU enlargement process has its dynamics throughout the years that still keep some of Balkan countries outside of its borders. Starting point for this analysis is perception matters. Hence, it aims to better understand the critical events from the history of interactions between EU and western part of Balkans that shaped the mutual perception that keep Balkan countries located in western part of the region away from the EU.*

*The article will analyze both sides, the EU, and the countries of western part of Balkans. First, it argues that the policy of the EU enlargement with western Balkan has deep roots in history. Hence, we will identify manifests that shaped EU's perceptions towards that region of Balkans. It will identify building blocks for enlargement resistance. Second, will scrutinize the unwillingness of the Balkan political elites to comply with accession criteria. Further, it will examine the internal regional manifests that contribute to the EU's perception and undermine development and prosperity. Many regional politicians have mastered to*

\* <https://doi.org/10.54842/ustich.1315682>

*talk the EU talk without delivering any genuine results. It will identify building blocks of stabilitocracy.*

*At the end, it will give recommendations that are implied from the stalled process. Since EU membership is first responsibility than a privilege, priority should be given to what western Balkan countries can do for themselves. Only then they can attract the EU interests to open enlargement again.*

**Key words:** *enlargement, stabilitocracy, resistance, geopolitics, instability, culture*

### **AB - BALKANLAR GENİŞLEME SÜRECİ ÇIKMAZI: ALGILAR, İSTİKRAR VE TAVSİYELERİN ROLÜ**

**Öz:** *AB genişleme süreci, yıllar boyunca Balkanların batı kesiminde yer alan ülkeleri hala sınırlarının dışında tutan dinamiklere sahiptir. Bu analizin başlangıç noktası algı meselesidir. Bu nedenle, Balkan bölgesinin batı kesimindeki ülkeleri AB'den uzak tutan karşılıklı algıyı şekillendiren AB ve batı Balkan etkileşimlerinin tarihindeki kritik olayları daha iyi anlamayı amaçlamaktadır.*

*Makale, AB ve batı Balkanlar olmak üzere her iki taraflı da analiz edecektir. İlk olarak, AB'nin Balkanların batı kesiminde bulunan ülkelerle genişleme politikasının tarihte derin kökleri olduğu savunulmaktadır. Bu nedenle, AB'nin batı Balkanlara yönelik algılarını şekillendiren tezahürler tespit edilecektir. Genişleme direncinin yapı taşları belirlenecektir. İkinci olarak, Balkan siyasi elitlerinin katılım kriterlerine uyma konusundaki isteksizliği incelenecektir. Ayrıca, AB'nin algısına katkıda bulunan ve kalkınma ve refahı baltalayan bölgesel iç tezahürleri inceleyecektir. Birçok bölgesel siyasetçi, gerçek bir sonuç ortaya koymadan AB ağızyla konuşmakta ustalaşmıştır. İstikrarlı demokrasinin yapı taşlarını tanımlayacaktır.*

*Son olarak, duraksamış süreçten çıkarılabilecek tavsiyelerde bulunacaktır. AB üyeliği bir ayrıcalıktan ziyade bir sorumluluk olduğundan, öncelik batı Balkan ülkelerinin kendileri için neler yapabileceklerine verilmelidir. Ancak bundan sonra AB'nin ilgisini tekrar genişlemeye çekebilirler.*

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *genişleme, stabilitokrasi, direniş, jeopolitik, istikrarsızlık, kültür*

## **Introduction**

The EU is facing myriad of critical geopolitical challenges that enlargement process has not been on the EU agenda since 2004. The last two round of enlargement in 2007 when Romania and Bulgaria and 2013 when Croatia got membership were by inertia, using the last breath of EU's willingness to enlarge. The EU membership first is responsibility than a privilege. Hence, if the countries located in the western part of Balkan region does not change the current inertia, it is likely that they will stay outside of the union soon.

Since than geopolitical environment has changed severely. The war in Ukraine dominates the EU's agenda. Managing the consequences of the second order effect of the war and maintaining the role as global actor is more likely that the EU will not be interested in opening the enlargement process in near future. Additionally, before the war in Ukraine, the EU was facing challenges such as rising unilateralism, internal fragmentation, Euroscepticism, populism, Brexit, trade wars, prolonged conflict in the Middle East, climate change, evolution of military warfare, migration, rising of geopolitical competition, and post – covid 19 consequences.<sup>1</sup> These challenges remain nowadays, just cannot get attention over the war in Ukraine. Flexing geopolitical muscles and at the same time trying to keep unity intact, the EU is assuming more self-centered policy that is extractive and does inspire confidence to future candidates. The critical element is trust. In such geopolitical shambles the EU is underperforming in maintaining the trust within the union and solid enlargement process. It is evident that Eastern European countries are objecting to some of the EU's policies, and they follow their own interests in making decisions. Hungary and Poland are the loudest one. They have been considered as leaders between member states with democratic backsliding. Yet, such conclusions are very arguable since respective governments got their public support. On the other side, hence, it seems that Balkan countries in the western part will stay outside of the EU in near future.

Living in abstract reality that EU membership is everyday closer to the countries in the west-Balkans will bring more political instability and economic degradation. Instead, these countries should work on

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1 Spyros Economides, 'From fatigue to resistance: EU enlargement and Western Balkan', 2020, Dehrendorf Froum IV Working paper No.17, Available at: <https://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/From-Fatigue-to-Resistance.pdf> Accessed on: 05 Sep 2022

strengthening their internal critical political and economic capacity to keep up with the global and EU challenges. Otherwise, soon they will become failing states. In this manner it is significant importance to examine why does the EU not want to integrate west part of Balkans. The existing literature examines EU –west-Balkan integration from the EU’s transformational power, conditionality, policies, and capability of enlargement. However, there is a lack of literature that scrutinize the building block of EU’s perceptions towards the said region than contribute to stalling the enlargement process. Likewise, scrutinize the internal causes from inside west-Balkans that contribute to stalling the enlargement process.

The article will examine the root causes of the interrupted process of EU’s enlargement with the west part of Balkans. In that manner, the article is divided in three parts. First part will examine what kind of root causes is EU generating that contribute to halting the enlargement process. Second part will analyze the behavior of the countries in the west-Balkans as second order effect from the EU influence. The last part of the analysis will suggest core principles that will improve reforms and transformations in the west-Balkan countries governance that can serve for further policy development.

The EU played two types of roles in west-Balkans enlargement policy. First, proactive role where it can use its transformative power to help these Balkans countries to overcome political and economic obstacles to successfully integrate in the union. In the last three rounds of enlargement the EU used its transformative power to enlarge. Additionally, the time frame and geopolitical conditions for Eastern European countries in 2004 when they got their membership, with west-Balkan’s contemporary conditions are not the same. Yet, starting from 2004 until 2013 as the last round of enlargement, the EU still did not take any measures to assume proactive role to integrate that part of Balkans in the union. Second, passive role focused on maintain the peace in the west-Balkans. In this case, EU’s perception of the countries located in the west part of Balkans is critical. Throughout the history the European countries to intervene in the Balkans to stop or manage armed conflicts. In the last three decades from 1991 the EU had to manage the Bosnian war, in 1999 Kosovo crisis, and Macedonian conflict in 2001 as the last one, including smaller skirmishes as remnants from these conflicts. These critical events made the EU’s peace building policy to dominate in correspondence with west-Balkans in the following years. Doing so EU has been influencing the governance system in the region.

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If we take EU membership as measure of success, we can assume that instead of inspiring and assisting in political reforms and economic development it transformed into stabilitocracy, a governance model to keep peace where every political party in that area is talking EU talks, but no one has delivered results yet.

On the west-Balkan side of the argument will be examined from two critical elements, external and internal. The external element focus on activates that are by product of direct EU influence. Such as governance model of stabilitocracy, indirect influence of historical irredentism, and agenda setting method are critical elements that impose to west-Balkans. The leadership of the countries in the west part of Balkans accept this model because it allows to keep political party influence and individual influence instead of building strong state institutions that can keep up with EU dynamic of reform process. The internal element is focused on activities that are sole responsibility of the west-Balkans countries. Answering the question what west-Balkan countries can do for themselves is critical. Instead of conclusion the article will propose vital core principles that can be used in creating future policies and governance reforms if there is a will to break current status quo.

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### **The historical concept of EU's perception**

Economides argued that EU developed resistance to enlargement policy.<sup>2</sup> This argument is valid in a contemporary situation. This is severe signal to the leadership of the countries of west-part of Balkans that they need to change current stagnation and make decision what kind of future they want to provide to their citizens. Yet we argue that this argument is not enough to understand why EU is stalling the enlargement with these Balkans countries because EU had many opportunities in the past two decades to paint the region (to integrate it) with blue color on the map. Hence, we argue that main reason for EU resistance to enlarge with the said countries has deep historical and cultural roots.

To understand why EU has stalled the enlargement with west-Balkans we need to start examining history of the EU's perceptions of the Balkans. Today's EU's behavior towards that part of Balkans is not suddenly changed. It was built in the past based on mutual interaction, geopolitical conditions, and influences. Much of the experts in social

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2 Economides, 2020

science are trying to predict the future. According to John Gaddis: “we bet on possible outcome about the future only from having learned about the past: without it we’d have no sense of even these fundamental truths, to say nothing of the words with which to express them, or even of who or where or what we are.”<sup>3</sup> Driven by his dictum: “We know the future only by the past we project into it” we can identify critical events that shaped EU’s perception towards west-Balkan countries. We consider the historic analysis how the EU built its perception for west-Balkans is critical because if the enlargement process is based on conditionality that EU must recognize as completed before granting membership. To further improve examination, analytical framework will use Bailyn’s (1982) concept of historical analysis based on manifest and latent events. The manifest events denote the actual occurrence of events in the past restraining from interpretation.<sup>14</sup> The latent events refer to events implied from manifest events. According to him, implementation of manifests and latent events as origins, causes, and interpretation are causes of most historiographical disputes since manifests events assume the role of “the facts” can be subject to different interpretations and understanding of concurrent latent events. Hence, identifying critical events from the history of the European and Balkan’s mutual interaction will identify building blocks of today’s EU’s perception.

These historical building blocks are roots of today’s perception. In this manner:

### **Historical aspect of building perception**

The European countries engage in the Balkans only to keep a peace in the region and protect their interests. This argument is based on historical analysis of the events when and why European countries are directly involved in the Balkans. This argument obviously is not new since there are many observers concluded decades ago. Yet, it is critical and understudied argument due to the overwhelming power of great powers actions while shaping the geopolitical environment. Accordingly, Theodore Ivanov Geshkoff wrote in 1940, ‘The Balkan events are usually reported to the outside world only in time of terror and trouble; the rest of the time they are scornfully ignored.’ It is during these long

3 John Gaddis, ‘The Landscape of History’, 2002, Oxford, New York, 3.

4 Bernard Bailyn. ‘The Challenge of Modern Historiography’ 1982, The American Historical Review, 87(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1863306>

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periods of neglect that the Balkan countries have badly needed the engagement of the great powers.”<sup>5</sup> “But if the Balkan states overestimated their own irredentist capacities, the great powers failed to take them seriously enough. They had a low opinion of their new creations and often treated them as puppets. For Count Grula Andrassy, the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, in 1873, Austria’s Near Eastern neighbors were “wild Indians who could only be treated like unbroken horses, to whom corn should be offered with one hand while they are threatened with a whip in the other.” Archduke Franz Ferdinand himself described Serbia as a land of “thieves and murderers and bandits and a few plum trees.”<sup>6</sup>

Hence, examination will start with Berlin Treaty from 1878 as first critical event that contribute to building the perception from two main reasons. First, this treaty has set the current regional political landscape regardless of Balkan’s states interests. Second, it represents a clear example of how, when, and why European powers are interacting with Balkans and denote as building block of European perception to Balkans.

The European powers were deeply concerned that with Treaty of San Stefano will lose their geostrategic influence in the Balkans and the Straits because Russia will have direct access and influence through Bulgari. They swiftly reacted with Berlin Treaty to enforce and secure their interests in the region.

The Russo – Turkish war ended as soon as the European powers saw that Russian troops were just about to enter İstanbul. “On February 12 the UK has involved to protect their interests in Straits and ordered the fleet to steam to İstanbul. Peace hung in the balance in this precarious manner until finally the Turks and the Russians signed the Treaty of San Stefano on March 3, 1878.”<sup>7-8</sup> The biggest problem with Treaty of San Stefano was that European powers were not consulted and none of the Balkan countries were happy with outcome except Bulgaria. “Bulgaria was to be established as an autonomous principality with an elected prince. The most significant provision of the treaty had to do with the

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5 Theodor I. Geshkoff in Misha Glenny, ‘The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804-2012’ 2012, Pinguin Books, 662.

6 Mark Mazower, ‘The Balkans: A short history’ 2000, The Modern Library, 132.

7 L. S. Stavrianos, ‘*The Balkans since 1453*’, 1958, Rinehart & Company Inc., New York, 406 – 410.

8 Mazower, 2000, 130.

territorial extent of the new principality. Apart from İstanbul, Edirne, and Saloniki, it included virtually all the territory between the Danube in the north, the Black Sea in the east, the Aegean Sea in the south, and Lake Ohrid and beyond in the west. Thus, a greater Bulgaria was created and European Turkey virtually annihilated.”<sup>9</sup> The main concern was that European powers were convinced that great Bulgaria as largest Balkan state in principality “would be merely a Russian outpost and that it would give Russia access to the Aegean and virtual control over İstanbul. He [Disraeli] also feared that Russia’s acquisitions in Asia Minor would culminate eventually in a Russian base on the Gulf of İskenderun.”<sup>10</sup> The main goal was to stop creating greater Balkan state. Soon after in July 1878 in Berlin an impressive galaxy of diplomats gathered in Berlin to reconsider the San Stefano Treaty under the Bismarck presidency. On the meeting there were diplomats from Turkey and the Balkans states. The Bismarck’s dictum is representing clear picture of how the Europeans were perceiving the Balkan region: “If you think the Congress has met for Turkey,” Bismarck bluntly told them, “disabuse yourselves. San Stefano would have remained unaltered, if it had not touched certain European interests.”<sup>11</sup> Considering the following events that European countries and letter EU when and why reacted in the Balkans, we consider Bismarck’s dictum has become European policy towards Balkans, that continue in present day. The second order effect of the Berlin Treaty was that Balkan states could not do any major territorial, political, and economic changes if there is no consent from European powers. This trend was embedded into the Balkans political culture. Greece masterfully used it to get European and US support during the civil war against communist movement and to contain Crete issue. In 1991, driven by irredentism raised irrational issue with name of Macedonia that forced Republic of Macedonia to change the name to Republic of North Macedonia.<sup>12</sup> To illustrate, the Greek Prime Minister Constantin Mitsotakis in November 1992 on the meeting in the White House, influenced President Bush perception that if US does not support Greece side in the name issue, the region will be destabilized. He said:

9 Stavrianos, 1958, 406-410.

10 Ibid. 408 – 410.

11 Ibid, 410.

12 Vankovska Biljana. “David vs. Goliath: The Macedonian position in the so-called “Name Dispute” with Greece” 2010. Challenges of Europeanization. No:58. Issue:3. p:438-467 Accessed 05 Dec 2020

[https://www.academia.edu/41284683/David\\_vs\\_Goliath\\_The\\_Macedonian\\_position\\_s\\_in\\_the\\_so\\_called\\_Name\\_Dispute\\_with\\_Greece](https://www.academia.edu/41284683/David_vs_Goliath_The_Macedonian_position_s_in_the_so_called_Name_Dispute_with_Greece)

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“What we cannot accept is their official name to include the term Macedonia. I’ll be very frank. If something like that were to happen, there will be real destabilization. But this issue can be settled now as a starting point for a positive approach.”<sup>13</sup> Key word here is destabilization. Even from today’s perspective there are no indicators that show regional destabilization is possible because if the Republic of Macedonia was recognized by its constitutional name there will be no obstacles to become NATO and EU members. Hence, Prime Minister Mitsotakis manipulate US perceptions in Greece favor by specifically using the word “destabilization” because the US policy in the Balkans is based on stability. Later, was proven that Greek selfish regional policy is one of the main drivers for regional stagnation. This issue will not be further elaborated because represent separate critical research topic for future analysis.

Subsequent the other critical events follow the same pattern and policy. Europeans reacted in the Balkans only to stop the war or conflict and to keep the peace. Thus, in continuing our analysis, the First in 1912 and Second Balkan War in 1913 were following critical events that has followed same policy. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was full of mutual agreements between European powers Britain, Germany, France, Austro-Hungary, Italy including Russia from east know as Triple Alliance and Triple Entente. Besides agreements often they could not agree on many issues in international and regional affairs. In the Balkans with proactive diplomatic policy Russians has manage to make Balkan countries to make mutual agreements to separate from collapsing Ottoman Empire. Yet, the biggest disagreement between Balkan states was territorial division of Macedonia.<sup>14</sup> The irredentist’s politics of Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece expanding their territories and people in Macedonia and European diplomatic shambles ended with Bucharest Treaty in August 1913. As a result, none of Balkan countries were satisfied and European powers continue to fight for influence which led to World War I. During the World War I and II, the Balkans countries have followed the major powers policies that did not require direct involvement.

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13 White House, ‘Memorandum of Conversation’ 1992, Washington, Available at: <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1992-11-17—Mitsotakis.pdf> Accessed 10 Sep 2020

14 Barbara Jelavich, ‘History of the Balkans’, 1983, The Joint Committee on Eastern Europe Publication Series, No. 12, 97.

Next direct involvement was in the 1990s. Following the collapse of USSR and subsequent end of the Cold War the US and Europeans were celebrating the victory of liberal democracy over communism. Yet, the fall of communism in the Balkans resulted with bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia. Amid Western domination of global arena with spreading liberal democracy, the Balkans became problematic again with the outbreak of war and conflicts. Peace must be maintained in the Balkans as a quick measure to eliminate distraction and continue enforcing liberal democracy. From the 1990s until 2001 three major conflicts erupted that all ended with peace enforcement, and none of these evolved into a development building agreement. The Dayton Accords to end Bosnian war. The Rambue Agreement to end Kosovo conflict. The Ohrid Framework Agreement to end Macedonian insurgency in 2001. In Macedonia, this Ohrid Agreement is a main source of continuous political instability<sup>15</sup> because it is not based on merits and pragmatism it just favorizing Albanian ethnicity without holding them responsible to the state. As a second order effect Macedonian ethnicity also is trying to avoid state's obligation. Hence, corruption become endemic. These agreements it did served the purpose, they stopped the conflict. Nevertheless, second order effect was creating two new open issues Bosnia federation and Kosovo as an international protectorate. Obviously, none of the international community care much how to solve these open issues because these agreements were celebrated supported. Anyone who will raise the voice that these agreements needed to change because they are obstacle for further development, is a threat to the region. Even, the US President Biden has issue executive order to protect "International Stabilization Efforts" in the Western Balkans in June 2021.<sup>16</sup> In such a milieu of regional internal shambles and international treatment there are two possible arguments. First, international community does not care about west part of Balkans if the stability is maintained. Second, they are aware of the regional complexity and

15 Vankovska, Biljana. "The Role of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the Peace Process in Macedonia" Longo editore, Ravenna, in Stefano Bianchini et al (eds.), Regional Cooperation, Peace Enforcement, and the Role of the Treaties in the Balkans, Jan 1, 2007 Accessed 05 Sep 2020

[https://www.academia.edu/1267906/The\\_role\\_of\\_the\\_Ohrid\\_framework\\_agree-ment\\_and\\_the\\_peace\\_process\\_in\\_Macedonia](https://www.academia.edu/1267906/The_role_of_the_Ohrid_framework_agree-ment_and_the_peace_process_in_Macedonia)

16 The White House, 'Executive Order Blocking Property and Suspending Entry into the US of Certain Persons Contributing to the Destabilizing Situation in the Western Balkans', 2021, Available at:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/08/executive-order-on-blocking-property-and-suspending-entry-into-the-united-states-of-certain-persons-contributing-to-the-destabilizing-situation-in-the-western-balkans/>

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waiting for the right moment to step up with a solution to help regional development. Nevertheless, critical question is: can the the countries located in west-Balkan wait? If the great powers fail to seize any opportunity soon by encouraging to solutions the open questions and provide clear incentives for development, the suffering of the Balkans will surely continue for several decades.

### **The concept of agenda-framing power**

The concept of agenda-framing is powerful tool preferred by EU rather than “transformative power” because it can be use more effectively according to what kind of outcome Brussels want to achieve on global arena and regional policies. Hence, it can be argued that after the enlargement rounds in 2007 and 2013 were results of agenda-framing to achieve strategic outcome rather than true enlargement.

After the Cold War, EU gained momentum that was named “EU transformative power” with “Big Bang” round of enlargement with Eastern European countries in 2004. Soon after this “transformative power” mutated into agenda-framing power. The concept of agenda-framing was defined by Joseph Ney in his book “Future of Power” as the ability “to keep less powerful countries off the table or, if they are invited, the rules of the game have already been set by those who arrived first.”<sup>17</sup> From today’s perspective we can argue that EU’s transformation power grew based on strong and dedicated interest of Eastern European countries to join EU. The EU used the momentum and will of the Eastern European to which the EU was safe haven after dissolution of USSR. In the last two decades, there is no example of EU transformative power because only three countries have become members after 2004 enlargement round. Hence, we can argue that “EU’s transformative power” has appeared only because Eastern European countries were already prepared to become EU members. They had transformed and decentralize their political systems and economies starting from the 1990s until 2004, according to Western European countries models.<sup>18</sup> Granting EU membership for Eastern European countries was much simpler because they already had decentralized all aspects of the political

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17 Joseph Ney. “*Future of Power*” 2011. Public Affairs, New York, p.12

18 Vaclav Klaus, ‘*Macedonia, the EU and the Tenets of the Contemporary World*’, 2022, Klaus Institute, Available at: <https://www.klaus.cz/clanky/5022>,

and economic system.<sup>19</sup> Accession process for them went from decentralization to centralization according to ideology of europeism, which asks for harmonization and unification, they were re-politicizing, reregulating, re-subsidizing and recentralizing our economy and society.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the EU's transformative power appears only if there is a strong strategic gain or interest for the EU. By enlargement with all European Countries the EU has gain full control of Norther European Plain that is clear and open avenue to Russia. It positions EU as major power that played a role of partner and foe to Russia. likewise, Western Balkan has proven that EU can tolerate any deviant behavior from democracy until their interests are not threaten, or there are no interests that can have global reach. Hereafter, the EU's transformative power turn to agenda-setting power for acquiring strategic influence.

The case of enlargement round in 2007, the EU was driven by its strategic interests rather than conditionality process and fulfilment of the reforms to grant membership to Romania and Bulgaria. Obviously both less powerful and even much lesser politically and economically aligned with Copenhagen's criteria, the EU used its agenda-setting power and signed accession agreement before both countries have fulfill required conditions.<sup>21</sup> Main reason was the strategic goal was to dominate Eastern border from Baltic Sea to Black Sea. At the same time, Bulgaria had a critical role in the European gas supplies competition between US and Russia. Bulgaria was supposed to be a main hub for Russian gas supplies through Sothern Stream in that time. In 2014 they have succeeded to persuaded Russia to canceled South Stream gas pipeline. In this manner next round of enlargement was to secure one of the alternative ways to gas supplies to Europe. Hence, second EU's agenda-framing power was used in enlargement round in 2013 with Croatia. By support of the US government, the goal was to build a liquefied natural gas plant on the Croatian island of Krk is coming into renewed focus. Tankers carrying Qatari, Algerian or eventually U.S. gas would unload there, and the gas could be shipped on to Hungary and the rest of the Balkans.<sup>22</sup>

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Heather Grabbe, 'The EU's transformative power: Europeanization through conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe, 2006, Palgrave Macmillan, London

22 Reuters, 'Cancellation of South Stream Pipeline Gives EU an Economic Headache' Newsweek, Available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/cancellation-south-stream-pipeline-gives-eu-economic-headache-288516>

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Accordingly, Western Balkans does not hold any strategic importance that directly endangered or improve EU or US interests. Hence, the agenda-framing power has been proven a useful tool in building “Western Balkans” perception. This way of perceiving west part of Balkan is fallacy because the region was and still is the fastest and shortest way to Europe. Romans proved it, and during the migration crisis in 2015 migrants have proved it again. With right leadership the region can be of the most benefit in gas, transport infrastructure, and supplies chain improvement. Yet, this concept is directly producing stagnation and degradation to the region.

Obvious differences in applying EU’s policies in said part of Balkans led to conclusion that EU is lacking strategic assessment base on factual reality not from EU’s neoliberal perspective. This was and still is one of the main factors that contribute to EU’s stalling the enlargement with the relevant countries of Balkans. The current EU approach to restructuring the region is perpetuating the problems rather than solving them. Thus, next part will scrutinize how the “Western Balkan” preserve the status quo.

### **Building blocks of “Western Balkan”’s stagnation**

Before examining regional indicators that contribute to EU to stall the enlargement process, first we need to define what “Western Balkan” is. Balkan is an official geographical and political term derived from Balkan Peninsula. Throughout the history Balkan is the most turbulent region in the European continent. It is defined by clash of interests of great powers and internal endemic irredentists’ policy between neighboring countries due the dogmatic believe in historic ownership of their own “Great” country in the region. Hence, this “Greatness” proves to be the strongest desire in the region policy that perpetuated until today.

Yet, the name “Western Balkan” does not appear right if we use geographical concept to define it because there is no geographical area such as Eastern, Northern, nor Southern Balkan. Hence, defining the term has political roots. “Western Balkans” originally referred to a subregion with a specific political, economic characteristic which incorporates all the states from former Yugoslavia (except Slovenia and Croatia which became EU members), plus Albania. The label “Western Balkans” depict countries of this region who are left outside the European Union and are subject to external interventions and

conditionality prior to eventual integration in the EU. Soon after was widely used in correspondence with the region.

Ministry of Foreign affairs in the Polish Government has defined it as: “Western Balkans is a term used in the European Union to refer to six countries in Southern and Eastern Europe that are covered by EU enlargement policy: Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Republic of Kosovo, Republic of North Macedonia, and Republic of Serbia.”<sup>23</sup> Further, Prof Mustafa Türkes in 2006 defined “Western Balkan” in correlation to EU enlargement process. The term used describe group of the countries in the Balkan Peninsula that are not part of the EU. It refers to the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Kosovo. Slovenia successfully used the EU escape route, becoming a member in May 2004. Following the Helsinki EU Summit decision of 1999, accession negotiations were opened in February 2000 in Bulgaria and Romania, which have provisionally completed membership negotiations. Croatia was swiftly granted EU candidacy status in the spring of 2004 and thus, like Bulgaria and Romania, now has a firm prospect of membership.<sup>24</sup>

Much less are important observations about defining the term “Western Balkan”. It is vital what EU and “Western Balkan” countries are doing or will do to finally help the region to start recover from protracted political instability and promote economic development. If the European countries can be financially supporting Afghanistan by allocating just in 2021 about 1 billion euros,<sup>25</sup> we can image what “Western Balkan” countries can do with this financial aid to strengthen and improve their economic systems.

23 MFA Polish Government, ‘Western Balkan’, Polish Government, Available at: <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/western-balkans>, accessed on 10 Sep 2022

24 Türkes, M., & Gökgöz, G. (2006). The European Union’s Strategy towards the Western Balkans: Exclusion or Integration? *East European Politics and Societies*, 20(4), 659–690. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325406293289> accessed on 10 Sep 2022

25 European Commission, ‘Afghanistan: Commission announces €1 billion Afghan support package’, 2021, available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_5208](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_5208) accessed on 10 Sep 2022

**Stabilitocracy: “Western Balkans”’s preferred governance model and perfect EU excuse to exclude the countries of the region from the union.**

Stabilitocracy is a regime with considerable shortcomings in democratic governance yet enjoys external (the EU and the US) legitimacy by offering some supposed stability. This model or system allows us to keep the same political context in the region. It grants survivability of the same regional corrupted political elites to hold on to power while the EU and the US offer silent or unintentional support. Nevertheless, this governance model becomes entrenched deep in the roots of the political culture in contemporary “Western Balkans”.

A brief history of the term stabilitocracy dates back to 2012 when Antoinette Primatarova and Johana Deimel tried to describe Albanian’s regime’s way of providing stability externally but domestically oscillating between democracy and autocracy. In 2016 Canadian academic Srdja Pavlovic<sup>26</sup> used it to describe Montenegrin’s regime that promotes undemocratic practices on which the West has turned a blind eye while simultaneously preaching the virtues of democracy and the rule of law. Further, in 2017 Florian Biber and Marko Kmezcic from The Balkans Europe Policy Advisory Group used this term to describe the state of democracy in the “Western Balkans” and highlight that the problem is not exclusively homemade. Next, Clingendale Institute from the Netherlands examines how EU is promoting stabilitocracy in the “Western Balkans”.<sup>27</sup> They scrutinize EU officials including US embassies, activities that intentionally or unintentionally promote stabilitocracy. Stabilitocracy benefits both, the West (the EU and the US) and the Balkan’s political elites. Considering contemporary research on stabilitocracy in the west part of Balkans, further examination should be done in direction of how to proceed with regional development and possible EU integration.

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26 Srgja Pavlovic, ‘Montenegro’s ‘stabilitocracy’: The West’s support of Đukanović is damaging the prospects of democratic change’ LSE, Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/12/23/montenegros-stabilitocracy-how-the-west-support-of-đukanovic-is-damaging-the-prospects-of-democratic-change/> Accessed on 10 Dec 2022.

27 Wouter Zweers, Giulia Cretti et. al, ‘The EU as a promoter of democracy or ‘stabilitocracy’ in the Western Balkans?’, Clingendale Institute and Think for Europe Network, Clingendale Report, Feb 2022, Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-promoter-stabilitocracy-western-balkans> Accessed on 10 Feb 2023.

The incomplete transition from social communism to democracy of the Balkan countries is a critical factor in promoting stabilitocracy between regional political elites. Many countries in the Balkan region have retained the political culture inherited from pre-democratic regimes. This created the lethargic process of fighting against corruption and implementing the rule of law. Slow progress is a result in self-preservation mode of transitional politicians. Hence, they are strengthening efforts in building intersubjective reality to keep the same political context. If the political context is changed by making the free market, building the strong culture of rule of law and merit-based system, they will lose their power. Besides all political elites have EU reform agenda as their priority, there is still delaying the implementation of measures and slowing down the progress in the same areas that EU have marked as critical. Civil society is excluded from the policymaking process and often marginalized due to the power that can trigger changes in a political context. Hence, the power is concentrated within political parties where often political party agenda identifies as the state's interests. Concept of stabilitocracy is benefiting both sides the EU and "Western Balkans".<sup>28</sup> The EU is supporting stabilitocracy because it can be used as a case against "Western Balkans" progress, it will allow EU to deal with its internal issues due to the crisis of liberal democracy and will not represent additional financial burden since their economies are far from close to competitive one.

Further, the Balkan political elites have learned that they will receive approval from the EU and the US if they maintain stability and demonstrate a commitment to reforms. There has not been any emphasis or requests for tangible results or delivery. In Albania, the government took short-term measures that threatened civil liberties and undermined good governance and democracy. In Macedonia (today's North Macedonia) current government continues to further jeopardize judicial independence and promote politicization in public administration. It can be concluded that they prefer to rule by law rather than enforce the rule of law. To all of these activities, the EU and the US turn a blind eye because none of these are endangering peace, which is the primary goal.

In 2020 authors Solveig Richter and Natasha Wunsch were arguing that EU conditionality has not only triggered positive developments in the

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28 Florian Biber, 'The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies' Horizons, Available at: <https://www.cirsd.org/files/000/000/005/21/5401cb7afdd44a46f24311cb2e627154c75639a8.pdf>

## **The EU - Balkans Enlargement Process Deadlock: The Role of Perceptions, Stabilitocracy, and Recommendations**

west part of Balkans,<sup>29</sup> even where it is applied in a correct manner. They describe specific context of post-conflict democratic transition prevalent in the region, where the challenge of simultaneous economic and political transition observed in the broader post-Communist region is compounded by ongoing processes of state-building and tense regional relations, conditionality has effectively enabled the consolidation of pathological political developments. In this milieu there are three distinct linkages connecting EU conditionality to the stabilitocracy. First, pressure for the liberalization of markets in the absence of a comprehensive legal framework allowed a small economic elite to realize private gains and build powerful networks that influence political decision-making (money). Second, strong top-down conditionality stifles domestic deliberation and weakens internal mechanisms of accountability, allowing ruling elites to silence domestic opponents (power).

Finally, progress towards EU membership and frequent interactions with high-ranking EU and member state officials serve to legitimize ruling elites (glory). As a result, the countries of the “Western Balkans” are stuck in a ‘state capture trap’ that leads to stagnating democratization and the inability to implement deep reforms.

To break this vicious cycle, the Balkan countries of west part of the region should stop chasing the pipedream of EU integration and focus on what they can do for themselves to initiate internal and regional development. This task requires inciting state’s values and enforcing principals that will build prosperous future.

The way forward: Three pillars to build prosperous future.

Implementing values to change political culture in the “Western Balkans” to some may sound very utopistic and impossible. However, “Western Balkans” has reach to the point where they do not have too many choices. They must stop living in abstract reality and wait the EU or US to help them to build prosperous future. They must work on improving internal social, political, and economic strength first. John Kotter dictum, Change or Die, very much associate with contemporary “Western Balkans” situation and what countries need.

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29 Solveig Richter and Natasha Wunsch, ‘How EU conditionality entrenches state capture in the Western Balkans’ London School of Economics, March 2019, Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/03/07/how-eu-conditionality-entrenches-state-capture-in-the-western-balkans/> Accessed on 05 Nov 2022

It gets obviously that EU is not interested in to integrate “Western Balkan” anytime soon. Since the current approach to EU membership just strengthen status quo, the best available option is to stop chasing the EU integration. The reforms and transformation should be done for the purpose of internal development and increasing resiliency instead chasing the EU integration. When regional countries will get economically stronger and more resilient from inside, only then, they can become attractive to EU. They should be focused on what they can do for themselves, not what and how the EU or the US can help them. Good start is to address political instability by eliminating ethnonationalist rhetoric, restructure economic system to minimize economic degradation, establishing resilient state institution by eliminating partyzation of institutions and corruption to be able to start creating trust in the governance.

Until now, the process was driven from top down, from EU officials pushing for reforms in the said Balkans countries. Hence, they need to change the process from bottom up. They need to start generating their own solutions from inside their respective countries. To be successful in navigating in unknown future, the new approach of restructuring should be based on three critical principles. Meritocracy, Pragmatism, and Respect are three basic principles that will allow returning trust in governance, provide equal opportunities for all ethnicities, and strengthen state institutions.

**Pragmatism** – Establishing strong state institutions. Since the EU will not be interested in enlargement soon, “Western Balkan” states should start asking what they can do for themselves. To expect help, assistance, and especially financial support, first states should be strong from inside (stable politics and competitive economy) that will make them reliable partner. Only than “Western Balkans” can expect the EU to change its mind towards enlargement. If they keep the current conditions, *id est*, maintain stabilitocracy the EU will never use its transformative power in “Western Balkans”.

**Respect** – solution to ethnonationalist rhetoric. Neo-liberal ideology is promoting tolerance. Tolerance overtime has proven that is a recipe for instability in multiethnic societies such as “Western Balkans”. Tolerance means, I do not like you, I do not need to work with you, but I will tolerate you. In ethnically complex environment any opportunities for creating exclusivity in favor of any ethnicity will lead to separatism and ethnonationalist politics. It will create vicious circle as it is current social

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situation in the west part of Balkans. Tolerance provides false perceptions of the factual reality because it does not inspire mutual interconnections between people. It encourages them to separate. Separatists' rhetoric does not provide cooperation and collaboration to economic development. On the other hand, respect has a simple rule. To expect respect, you should give respect. In "Western Balkan" ethnical context all ethnicities have equal responsibility towards respective state in which they live in. Hence, all of them have equal responsibility in building a prosperous future. Respect will allow people to see beyond their ethnic difference and will help them to understand the true meaning of cooperation and collaboration in building a prosperous future.

**Meritocracy** – solution to exclusivity of any ethnicity and limit political party influence on state institutions. First all ethnicities have equal responsibilities to the state, then they get privileges. First, meritocracy can be a catalyst for interculturalism, and promote transformational power to change the political, work, and organizational culture. Someone might argue or we in the Balkans as we are accustomed to say: "...but that's not possible in the Balkans," here are some indicators that prove otherwise. If young and open-minded politicians take responsibility and limit or remove current political parasites (current corrupted politicians that hold grip to power), they can create conditions to appoint qualified leaders in state institutions. Consequently, qualified workforce can be appointed to state institutions. This will enable equal conditions for everyone and will break the vicious cycle of partitioning of state institutions that enables current corruption. In this milieu, political party membership or ethnicity does not matter; what matters is whether one has what education, knowledge, and experience to work have. In this way, interethnic relations will also improve because the goal of interculturalism is an open dialogue about common responsibilities instead of demanding more rights to particular ethnicity.

### **Conclusion**

The "Western Balkans" journey towards EU integration has been marred by a broken enlargement process and various mutual perceptions between the region and the EU. The concept of stabilitocracy, which prioritizes stability and keeps the same political culture over democratic reforms, has contributed to a stagnation in the region's progress. However, there is a need to shift the focus and adopt a new approach based on the principles of meritocracy, pragmatism, and respect.

The mutual perceptions between the west part of Balkans and the EU have often been characterized by misunderstandings and frustrations. The EU's reluctance to integrate the region anytime soon has left the that region feeling disillusioned and uncertain about their future. Conversely, the EU has perceived the region as lagging behind in terms of democratic reforms and rule of law, leading to a lack of confidence in the enlargement process.

Stabilitocracy, with its emphasis on maintaining stability at the expense of essential reforms, has hindered the progress of the "Western Balkans". This approach has allowed political elites to hold onto power, perpetuating corruption and hampering the development of strong institutions. The focus on stability alone has created a stagnant environment that does not foster genuine progress or address the region's underlying challenges.

To overcome these obstacles, the principles of meritocracy, pragmatism, and respect should be embraced. Meritocracy calls for the appointment of qualified individuals based on their abilities and skills, rather than political affiliation or ethnicity. By promoting meritocracy, the region can break free from the grip of corrupt politicians and build strong and effective institutions.

Pragmatism is crucial in shifting the focus from EU integration as the sole objective to internal development and resilience. The "Western Balkans" must take responsibility for their own progress and prioritize internal stability, competitiveness, and good governance. By demonstrating their commitment to these goals, the region can become an attractive partner for the EU and reshape the perception of its integration prospects.

Respect is a fundamental principle that promotes collaboration, cooperation, and inclusivity. It requires recognizing and valuing the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds within the Western said part of Balkans. By fostering an environment of respect, the region can transcend ethnic divisions, encourage dialogue, and build a shared vision for a prosperous future.

At the end, the broken enlargement process between the "Western Balkans" and the EU calls for a reevaluation of strategies and a shift in focus. By embracing the principles of meritocracy, pragmatism, and respect, the region can pave the way for genuine progress, internal development, and stronger institutions. This will not only enhance its own prospects but also reshape the perception and commitment of the EU towards the said part of Balkans' integration.

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