

## EVALUATING EU DEMOCRACY PROMOTION EFFORTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA\*

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Research Article

### *Abstract*

*The European Union (EU) has consistently positioned itself as a committed normative power, dedicated to the promotion of liberal democratic values both within its borders and beyond. In this context, promotion of democracy stands as a fundamental objective of its foreign policy, and it leverages a variety of tools to exert influence. The post-Socialist Western Balkans serves as a critical testing ground for the EU's efforts in this field. Since the early 2000s, the Union has embarked on a dual process of Europeanisation and post-conflict transformation within the region where the state of democracy remains problematic. This article evaluates the EU's democracy promotion efforts in the Republic of Serbia. Acknowledging the EU's limitations in promoting democracy in the country, it explores the underlying reasons. The analysis posits that the EU's failure in Serbia can be attributed to three primary factors: an inconsistent approach, a shifting focus during crises, and the impact of opportunistic actors.*

**Keywords:** European Union, democracy promotion, liberal democracy, Western Balkans, Serbia

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**Batı Balkanlar'da AB Demokrasi Teşviki Çabalarının Değerlendirmesi:  
Sırbistan Cumhuriyeti Örneği**

**Öz**

*Avrupa Birliği (AB), sınırları içinde ve ötesinde liberal demokratik değerlerin teşvikine kendini adanmış, kararlı bir normatif güç olarak kendisini sürekli olarak konumlandırmıştır. Bu bağlamda, demokrasinin teşvik edilmesi dış politikasının temel bir hedefi olarak durmakta ve etki yaratmak için çeşitli araçlardan yararlanmaktadır. Sosyalizm sonrası Balkanlar, AB'nin bu alandaki çabaları için kritik bir test alanı teşkil etmektedir. Birlik, 2000'li yılların başından bu yana, demokrasi durumunun hala sorunlu olduğu bu bölgede Avrupalılaşıma ve çatışma sonrası dönüşüm olmak üzere ikili bir süreç başlatmıştır. Bu makale AB'nin Sırbistan Cumhuriyeti'ndeki demokrasiyi teşvik politikasının bir değerlendirmesini sunmaktadır. AB'nin bu ülkedeki demokrasinin teşviki konusundaki kısıtlılıklarını kabul ederek, bunun altında yatan nedenleri araştırmaktadır. Analiz, AB'nin Sırbistan'daki başarısızlığının üç temel faktöre atfedilebileceğini öne sürmektedir: tutarsız bir yaklaşım, krizler sırasında değişen odak noktası ve fırsatçı aktörlerin etkisi.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Avrupa Birliği, Demokrasi Teşviki, liberal demokrasi, Batı Balkanlar, Sırbistan*

**Introduction**

Since its foundation in 1957, as the European Economic Community (EEC), the European Union always aimed at fostering peace and stability and promote human rights, democracy, peace, liberty, and respect for fundamental freedoms in the European continent. However, in the post-Cold War era, as the Western world has operated under the conviction that fostering democracy would enhance global peace, the worldwide dissemination of these core values became a priority. As the global initiatives to promote democracy have intensified, the EU has also institutionalized the promotion of its liberal values as a foreign policy principle. At the same time the EU also began to integrate promotion of democracy into all its policies and strategies, leveraging its normative power to influence third party states to conform to European norms and values.<sup>1</sup>

In the early 2000s, after a decade long dissolution of Socialist Yugoslavia was finally over, the EU took the responsibility to transform the Western Balkans and with the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 offered a membership perspective to all of the countries of the region. By utilizing its normative

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Manners, “The Concept of Normative Power in World Politics”, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2009.

power, the Union engaged in the post-conflict transformation, employed EU conditionality and several other tools to promote democracy.<sup>2</sup> The Republic of Serbia, after the overthrow of the Milosevic regime in 2000 was one of the targets of the EU's democracy promotion efforts.

While acknowledging the importance of local factors and dynamics in shaping democratization outcomes, this article evaluates the democracy promotion efforts of the EU in the Republic of Serbia following the overthrow of the Milosevic regime, arguing that the attempts to democratize the country has encountered major difficulties. Attributing these difficulties to three primary challenges: an inconsistent approach, a shifting focus during crises, and the impact of opportunistic actors, this article attempts to analyse the underlying factors of setback in democratic progress in Serbia. The study consists of four parts. The first section discusses the EU's democracy promotion policy, including the emergence of the policy, the areas in which it is integrated, and the approaches adopted. In the second part, the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans is analysed and the strategies and programmes for the region are discussed. The third section assesses Serbia's progress in the field of democratisation. The fourth section analyses the reasons for the failure of democracy promotion in Serbia. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings.

### **I. EU's Democracy Promotion Policy**

Prior to the end of the Cold War, democracy was primarily an internal principle within the EU. However, the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union necessitated the EU's adaptation to these global developments. While the EU has verbally emphasized its values and norms since its foundation, more recently, it has strengthened its norm diffusion activities by codifying these principles in its fundamental treaties. The first emphasis on democracy promotion appears in the Treaty on European Union (TEU) of 1992 (also known as Maastricht). Article 2 of the TEU explicitly states the Union's values, including respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law.<sup>3</sup> Article 3(5) of the same treaty expresses that "The Union shall safeguard and promote its values and

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<sup>2</sup> Iordan Gheorghe Barbulescu and Miruna Troncota, "EU's 'Laboratory' in the Western Balkans: Experimenting Europeanization Without Democratization. The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*, 2013, 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Treaty on European Union (Consolidated Version)*, *Treaty of Maastricht*. Official Journal of the European Union C 326/13, February 7, 1992; October 26, 2012.

interests in its relations with the outside world..." After that the emphasis on democracy is seen in the Copenhagen criteria announced in 1993 within the framework of the enlargement policy. The 2007 Lisbon Treaty also confirms promotion of democracy in Article 10A (2) of Chapter 1 emphasises that "the Union shall pursue policies and actions to strengthen and promote democracy, the rule of law and the principles of international law."<sup>4</sup> Thus, it could be said that democracy's importance within the EU has grown, permeating its essence and positioning it as a leading promoter of democracy worldwide.

To be a successful democracy promoter, the EU has focused on three main aspects: motivation, mechanism, and model. First, in terms of motivation, the EU highlights its normative power, justifying its efforts to promote democracy by aiming to spread liberal democratic values and shape global perceptions. This commitment to democratic principles has grown alongside the Union itself and is the primary motivation behind its democracy promotion initiatives. The rise of the EU's efforts in this area reflects its international role expectations.

Second, while the EU had principles in place, it needed effective mechanisms to promote them. The TEU marked a significant step in shaping the EU's common foreign policy and enhancing its policy-making capabilities.<sup>5</sup> This treaty provided the EU tools like conditionality, assistance, and monitoring, making it more active and effective in foreign policy. The EU has also diversified its approaches, employing both bottom-up and top-down strategies. Additionally, the EU can carry out its policy either through direct communication with target groups or indirectly through intermediary organizations. In consequence, promoting democracy has become a fundamental aspect of the EU's foreign policy, aimed at spreading liberal democracy using these various tools.

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<sup>4</sup> *Treaty of Lisbon Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community*. December 13, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Tonra and Thomas Christiansen, *Rethinking European Union foreign policy*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004, 5.

## EUROPEAN UNION

<b>Interest in democracy promotion</b>	Starting from the 1970s
<b>Type of democracy</b>	Liberal democracy
<b>Motivation</b>	Normative
<b>Tools</b>	Conditionality, assistance, monitoring
<b>Approach</b>	Bottom-up & top-down
<b>Influence</b>	Direct & indirect
<b>Models</b>	Linkage, leverage and governance

*Table 1: The EU's Democracy Promotion Card<sup>6</sup>*

Third, the EU's approach to democracy promotion revolves around three models: leverage, linkage, and governance, inspired by Levitsky and Way. These models blend traditional and modern strategies to foster democratic norms.<sup>7</sup> The linkage model focuses on nurturing a democratic culture by addressing socio-economic conditions crucial for democratization. It involves direct support to democratic opposition and indirect activities to improve societal conditions. The EU promotes economic growth and education to enhance democratic norms and culture, though success hinges on the target state's openness to external engagement.<sup>8</sup> The leverage model targets political processes and institutions, employing conditionality to encourage governance reforms and accountability. By leveraging asymmetrical power dynamics, the EU applies strict conditionality in its dealing with aspirant and candidate states, linking incentives such as financial aid to compliance.<sup>9</sup> The governance model concentrates on specific sectors such as internal security or environmental policy, transferring procedural principles through transgovernmental channels. Its goal is to improve accountability,

<sup>6</sup> Simge Pelit, "It takes two to tango! An analysis of the EU's failed democracy promotion efforts in Serbia" Master's Thesis, Hacettepe University, 2022, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Tina Freyburg et al., "Models of EU Democracy Promotion: From Leverage to Governance", In *Democracy Promotion by Functional Cooperation*, by Tina Freyburg, Sandra Lavenex, Frank Schimmelfennig, Tatiana Skripka, and Anne Wetzell, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Freyburg et al., "Models", 14-17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-20.

transparency, and participation in administrative practices. The EU utilizes this model with countries that are neither members nor candidates.<sup>10</sup> These models—linkage, leverage, and governance—complement each other by emphasizing democratic principles, social participation, and elite involvement.

	<b>Linkage</b>	<b>Leverage</b>	<b>Governance</b>
<b>Target</b>	Society	Polity	Sector
<b>Outcome</b>	Democratic culture	Democratic institutions	Democratic governance
<b>Channel</b>	Transnational	Intergovernmental	Transgovernmental
<b>Instrument</b>	Socialization	Conditionality	Learning/Socialization
<b>Case</b>	Latin American countries in the 1980s	the CEE and the WB countries	the ENP countries such as Moldova, Morocco and Ukraine

*Table 2: Models of EU's Democracy Promotion<sup>11</sup>*

Although democracy promotion is often linked with EU enlargement policy, it covers various areas. In the post-Cold War period, the EU has incorporated democracy, the rule of law and human rights into its foreign policies and adapted its approach to the regions. Mainly favouring a positive method, the EU uses assistance, diplomacy, and conditionality.<sup>12</sup> Starting with Development Policy in the late 1980s, the EU introduced programs for African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries. The Lomé Agreements focused on economic issues, offering preferential trade and financial aid. With the Cotonou Agreement in 2000, conditionality was strengthened to emphasize EU principles.<sup>13</sup>

Democracy promotion became central to enlargement policy after the Copenhagen Summit in 1993, which set political, economic, and legal

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>11</sup> Pelit, "It takes two to tango!", 52.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Simmons, "The State of the Art in the EU Democracy Promotion Literature", *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 7/1, 2011, 130.

<sup>13</sup> Tanja Börzel and Thomas Risse, "One Size Fits All! EU Policies for the Promotion of Human Rights", *Democracy and the Rule of Law*, 2004, 1-6.

requirements for potential members. These criteria facilitated the transition of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, leading to the Europe Agreements and assistance programs like PHARE (Poland and Hungary Aid for Economic Reconstruction). The success in CEE extended the enlargement perspective to South-Eastern Europe with programs like CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development, and Stabilization).<sup>14</sup> The EU's use of conditionality ensured compliance with democratic standards.<sup>15</sup>

Later, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was developed to achieve political and economic stability around the EU, like the enlargement policy but without membership prospects. The ENP aims to enhance security in the EU's neighbourhood.<sup>16</sup> Following the collapse of Soviet Union and eastern enlargement, the EU encountered new challenges in the Middle East, the Southern Mediterranean, and Eastern Europe. Promoting democracy, human rights, and rule of law in these regions became a strategic goal, supported by programs like MEDA (Mediterranean Development Assistance) and TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States).<sup>17</sup>

## II. EU's Approach towards the Western Balkans

The EU was established to prevent war and preserve peace in Europe, a goal it achieved for over fifty years.<sup>18</sup> The Union prioritized European integration to maintain peace, recognizing strength in unity. Its enlargement strategy underscores peaceful integration on a continental scale which serves as the EU's foreign policy instrument to assess states seeking membership by spreading the EU's values, norms and understanding.<sup>19</sup> This grants the EU significant power to set rules and influence international standards, intertwining domestic and international spheres.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 7-11.

<sup>15</sup> Simmons, "The State of the Art", 133.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>17</sup> Börzel and Risse, "One Size Fits All!", 12.

<sup>18</sup> Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, "European Integration of Western Balkans: From Reconciliation to European Future", *Centre for European Studies*, 2012, 6.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission, *Continuing enlargement - Strategy paper and Report for the European Commission on the progress towards accession by Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey*, COM (2003) 676, 2003, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Karen E. Smith and Helene Sjørnsen, "Justifying EU foreign policy: the logics underpinning EU enlargement", In: Christiansen, Thomas and Tonra, Ben, (eds.)

In the post-Cold War era, with former socialist states eyeing EU membership, the Union utilized enlargement to spread democracy, prosperity, and security.<sup>21</sup> Bound by its commitments, the EU had little choice but to commit itself to the democratization of the former socialist states. Membership promises encouraged reforms, fostering stability and peace.<sup>22</sup> The "Return to Europe" motivated states to adhere to EU conditions, adopting liberal democratic norms.<sup>23</sup> Enlargement's success reshaped post-communist states, making it the EU's most successful foreign policy, aiding in democracy transition, human rights, and security.<sup>24</sup>

The EU faced a setback when it initially hesitated to intervene in the turmoil on the Balkan Peninsula in the 1990s. As Yugoslavia began to dissolve, the EU adopted a hands-off approach, focusing on crisis management and humanitarian aid while exerting diplomatic pressure from a distance.<sup>25</sup> However, this strategy proved disastrous, tarnishing the EU's reputation and undermining its actorness on the international stage.<sup>26</sup> The failure to suppress violence in its own backyard damaged both its foreign policy and normative power identity.

It wasn't until later in the conflict, particularly during the Bosnian War, that the EU recognized its shortcomings and began seeking a better approach for the region.<sup>27</sup> Following the Dayton Agreement, eventually, it became more involved in the post-conflict environment, assuming responsibility for the future of the region and shifted its perspective on the region, viewing it as an integral part of Europe.

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Rethinking Eu Foreign Policy. Europe in change. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004, 126-127.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Smith, "Negotiating New Europes: The Roles of the European Union", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 7(5), 2011, 300.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 300-312.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, "Theorizing EU enlargement: research focus, hypotheses, and the state of research", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 9/4, 2002, 520.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig, "EU political accession conditionality after the 2004 enlargement: consistency and effectiveness", *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15/6, 2008, 918.

<sup>25</sup> Dorian Jano, "EU-Western Balkans Relations: The Many EU Approaches", In B.V. Steenbergen (Ed.), *Special Issue on the Mediterranean Beyond Borders: Perspectives on Integration*, 2/1, 2008, 143.

<sup>26</sup> Arolda Elbasani, "EU enlargement in the Western Balkans: strategies of borrowing and inventing", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, 10/3, 2008, 295.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 295.



The Royamont Process, launched in 1996, focused on enhancing regional cooperation and fostering good neighbourly relations. Building on this, the Regional Approach, introduced a year later, set conditions for engagement with the Western Balkans countries (refers to former Yugoslav republics and Albania), emphasizing human rights, the rule of law, and democratic principles.<sup>28</sup> Unlike previous approaches, this one offered rewards for meeting conditions, such as trade concessions and financial assistance, but lacked EU membership perspective.<sup>29</sup>

The Kosovo War in 1999 revealed the inadequacy of the EU's approach to the Western Balkans, prompting a reassessment of its strategy.<sup>30</sup> The need for a more robust and comprehensive approach became evident as the EU's credibility was questioned once again.<sup>31</sup> In response, the EU introduced the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe in 1999, aiming to coordinate EU member efforts in conflict prevention and peacebuilding while offering a membership perspective to the Western Balkans.<sup>32</sup> This pact signified the EU's political commitment to Europeanize the Western Balkans.

Subsequently, at the Feira European Council meeting in 2000, the EU confirmed the Western Balkan countries as potential candidates for EU membership. This was further solidified at the Thessaloniki European Council meeting in 2003, where the EU reaffirmed its commitment to the region, stating that the future of the Western Balkan countries lies within the EU.<sup>33</sup> The EU has embraced the challenge posed by the Western Balkans with the understanding that "For new democracies, Europe is a powerful symbol, signifying their fundamental values and aspirations".<sup>34</sup>

The EU's earnest aspiration in the Western Balkans is to guide regional countries towards the coveted goal of membership. The enlargement process is considered crucial for promoting political and democratic transformation in the Western Balkans.<sup>35</sup> To transform war-torn countries, the EU prioritized the transition to democracy, viewing it as both a fundamental value and a strategic

<sup>28</sup> Elbasani, "EU enlargement", 295.

<sup>29</sup> Mustafa Türkeş and Göksu Gökgöz, "The European Union's Strategy towards the Western Balkans: Exclusion or Integration?" *East European Politics and Societies*, 20/4, 2006, 676.

<sup>30</sup> Elbasani, "EU enlargement", 297.

<sup>31</sup> Türkeş and Gökgöz, "The European Union's Strategy", 676.

<sup>32</sup> Jano, "EU-Western Balkans", 145.

<sup>33</sup> European Council, *EU-Western Balkans Summit Declaration*, 10229/03 (Presse 163), 2003, 2.

<sup>34</sup> COM (2003) 676, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Rosa Balfour and Corina Stratulat, "The democratic transformation of the Balkans", *EPC Issue Paper* (No.66)", 2011, 1-5.

tool. Democracy is essential for consolidating states and societies in the Western Balkans, empowering citizens to address issues collectively. Thereafter, the EU has been actively engaged in democracy promotion in the region.<sup>36</sup>

The primary tool for promoting democracy is political conditionality, which involves both political and acquis-related conditionality.<sup>37</sup> Political conditionality is essential for fostering democratic transition and consolidation, focusing on norms, values, and political standards, while acquis-related conditionality pertains to legal frameworks.<sup>38</sup> Alongside political conditionality, the EU employs financial assistance and monitoring to assist reform processes.<sup>39</sup> Efforts like the Stability Pact (SP) and the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) aim to ensure irreversible democratic transformation in the Western Balkans.<sup>40</sup>

The SAP embodies a comprehensive approach extended to the Western Balkans, focusing on conditionality and bilateral contractual relations with each Balkan country. It draws on previous enlargement experiences to promote democratic, economic and institutional reforms.<sup>41</sup> The SAP consists of three phases: preparatory, negotiation, and implementation, each crucial for progress towards potential candidate status.<sup>42</sup> Progress through the SAP hinges on individual country merits, with six key areas of focus: economic and trade relations, financial assistance, democratization, justice and home affairs, political dialogue, and negotiation of Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Solveig Richter, “Two at one blow? The EU and its quest for security and democracy by political conditionality in the Western Balkans”, *Democratization*, 19/3, 2012, 508.

<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Pridham, “Change and Continuity in the European Union's Political Conditionality: Aims, Approach, and Priorities”, *Democratization*, 14/3, 2007, 446.

<sup>38</sup> Othon Anastasakis, “The EU's political conditionality in the Western Balkans: towards a more pragmatic approach”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 8/4 2008, 365-367.

<sup>39</sup> Geoffrey Pridham, “Securing Fragile Democracies in the Balkans: The European Dimension”, *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, 8/2, 2008, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Balfour and Stratulat, “The democratic transformation”, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Emilian Kavalski, “The western Balkans and the EU: the probable dream of membership”, *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, 6/1, 2003, 203.

<sup>42</sup> Harald Schenker, “The Stabilization and Association Process: An Engine of European Integration in Need of Tuning”, *Jemie*, 7/1, 2008, 2.

<sup>43</sup> European Commission, *The Stabilization and Association Process for Countries of South-Eastern Europe*, COM (99) 235, 1999.

### III. Progress of the Republic of Serbia

The relationship between Serbia and the EU can be divided into two phases: the first from the start of the Yugoslav wars in 1991 until the end of Milosevic's regime in 2000, and the second, from the establishment of a pro-EU government in the post-Milosevic era until today.<sup>44</sup>

At first, Serbia faced international isolation due to its stance on the Yugoslav wars and the Kosovo crisis. In the aftermath of the wars in Yugoslavia, Serbia emerged as a revisionist player in the Balkans, prompting the international community, notably the EU, to take proactive steps to prevent further chaos and maintain regional peace. As a first step, democracy assistance was provided to support political parties and electoral process. However, since this aid to Serbia was perceived as tacit support for Milosevic, the country faced minimal aid and was subject to international sanctions. As it soon became clear that Milosevic's removal was necessary for Serbia's democratic transformation, support for opposition politicians was mobilised and Milosevic was overthrown in October 2000.<sup>45</sup>

The democratic transformation in Serbia began when post-Milosevic politicians gradually aligned their agenda with European integration goals.<sup>46</sup> Only after Milosevic's ousting in 2000 did Serbia accept the Stability Pact and get recognized as a potential EU candidate at the Feira Council meeting, which allowed the EU to push for political reforms.<sup>47</sup> In this phase, Serbia, under new political elites, implemented radical economic reforms and aimed for alignment with EU conditions.<sup>48</sup> However, transitioning to a modern democratic state proved challenging due to entrenched structures from the previous regime.<sup>49</sup> Despite the fall of Milosevic, remnants of the old regime remained, hindered the progress.<sup>50</sup> Issues such as institutional weaknesses,

<sup>44</sup> Jovan Bazic, "Relations of Serbia and European Union: Socio-Historical Determinants and the Contemporary Political Issues", *Politeja*, 16/3(60), 2019, 307.

<sup>45</sup> Olena Nikolayenko, "Origins of the movement's strategy: The case of the Serbian youth movement Otpor", *International Political Science Review*, 34/2, 2013, 141.

<sup>46</sup> Maja Bobic, "National Convention on the EU in Serbia-tangible result of sharing transition experience", *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 25/3-4, 2016, 79.

<sup>47</sup> Olivera Djordjevic, "The Limits of Europeanization "from without": Is There an EU-Driven Democratization Process in Serbia?" *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, 18, 2008, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Bazic, "Relations of Serbia", 307.

<sup>49</sup> "After Milošević: a practical agenda for lasting Balkans peace", *International Crisis Group (ICG)*, Balkans Report (No.108), 2001, xiv.

<sup>50</sup> Ivan Vejvoda, "Serbia after four years of transition", In J. Batt (Ed.), *The Western Balkans: moving on*. Chaillot Paper. (No. 70)", 2004, 38.

territorial disputes, and nationalistic sentiments further complicated the transition.<sup>51</sup> Despite EU support, Serbia's democratic journey was marked by slow progress.<sup>52</sup>

Serbia's EU accession was made dependent on progress in democracy, human and minority rights, compliance with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and resolution of the Kosovo issue.<sup>53</sup> These issues had to be addressed for Serbia's transformation and eventual accession to the Union. Negotiations on the SAA stalled in 2005 due to non-cooperation with the ICTY, resuming only in 2007.<sup>54</sup> Kosovo's 2008 independence declaration further complicated accession, adding EU conditions for normalizing relations with Kosovo.<sup>55</sup> Unresolved statehood and identity issues continued to hinder Serbia's democratization and EU progress. Resolving these issues is crucial for Serbia's EU membership progress.

In 2011, the European Commission outlined specific tasks for Serbia, including judicial reforms, regional cooperation improvements, economic reforms, and full cooperation with the ICTY, as prerequisites for obtaining candidate status.<sup>56</sup> Regardless of domestic opposition, Serbia successfully cooperated with the ICTY, leading to its designation as a candidate country in 2012 and the initiation of accession negotiations in 2014. At the same time, the new Serbian government led by Aleksandar Vucic has given the green light to prioritise EU integration.<sup>57</sup> The signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013 further bolstered Serbia's relationship with the EU, providing Vucic with domestic political leverage.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dusan Pavlovic, "The political economy behind the gradual demise of democratic institutions in Serbia", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20/1, 2020, 20.

<sup>52</sup> Florian Bieber, "Belated transitions in South Eastern Europe", In A. Fagan & P. Kopecky (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of East European Politics*, Routledge, 2018a, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Adam Fagan, The EU and the Western Balkans. In A. Fagan (Ed.), *Europe's Balkan Dilemma Path to Civil Society or State-Building*, I.B. Tauris, 2010, 115.

<sup>54</sup> Djordjevic, "The Limits of Europeanization", 90.

<sup>55</sup> Bazic, "Relations of Serbia", 308-309.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 309.

<sup>57</sup> Nikola Burazer, "Democracy and Human Rights Assessing Serbia's Progress on the EU Accession Agenda 2016-2020", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, 2020, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Branislav Radeljic, "Semi-Authoritarianism Accepted: The European Union's Problematic Involvement in Serbia", *Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research*, XLII Special Issue, 2018, 71.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Event</b>
2000	Former Republic of Yugoslavia joined the SAP during the Biarritz Summit
2003	EU membership promise at Thessaloniki Summit
2004	Twin-Track approach to Serbia & Montenegro
2005	Negotiations on the SAA started
2006	Negotiations on the SAA called off due to insufficient cooperation with the ICTY
2007	SAA negotiations restarted after Serbia's cooperation with The Hague
2008	SAA signed
2009	Visa liberalization & Serbia applied for EU membership
2010	The Interim Trade Agreement that signed between Serbia and the EU came into force
2011	European Commission's opinion about Serbia regarding its candidacy status
2012	Serbia became a candidate country
2013	SAA entered into force & Council approved the Commission's recommendation to open negotiations with Serbia
2014	First Intergovernmental Conference between the EU and Serbia
2015	Chapters 32 "Financial control" and 35 "other issues- Normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo" are opened.
2016	Chapters 23 "Judiciary and fundamental rights", 24 "Justice, freedom and security", 5 "Public procurement" and 25 "Science and Research" are opened. Chapter 25 provisionally closed.
2017	Chapters 20 "Enterprise and industrial policy", 26 "Education and culture", 7 "Intellectual property law", 29 "Customs Union", 6 "Company law" and 30 "External relations" are opened. Chapter 26 provisionally closed.
2018	Chapters 13 "Fisheries", 33 "Financial and budgetary provisions", 17 "Economic and monetary policy" and 18 "Statistics" are opened.
2019	Chapters 9 "Financial services" and 4 "Free movement of capital" are opened.
2020	Commission proposes Economic & Investment Plan to support the WBs
2021	Opening of cluster 4 on Green agenda and sustainable connectivity

*Table 3: Serbia's EU Path<sup>59</sup>*

<sup>59</sup> Pelit, "It takes two to tango!", 114.

Although Vucic has authoritarian tendencies, his government has seen improvements in Serbia's accession process, earning praise as an "anchor of stability" in the region.<sup>60</sup> The EU, aiming to safeguard its geopolitical interests, has refrained from taking a firmer stance against Serbia's illiberal policies, expecting Vucic's government to serve its broader interests.<sup>61</sup>

While cooperation with the ICTY and normalisation with Kosovo remain major obstacles to Serbia's democratisation and EU perspective, recent developments have failed to stimulate reforms, particularly in the areas of democracy and rule of law.<sup>62</sup> The EU has called on Belgrade to embrace democratic principles, norms, and values to complete its transition. To support this effort, the Union has prepared a roadmap for promoting democracy in Serbia, which includes adherence to the Copenhagen political criteria and other benchmarks such as regional cooperation and compliance with international obligations. Serbia's advancement in these areas will be evaluated in three categories: democracy and rule of law, human rights and minority rights, and regional and international obligations.

The first category is democracy and the rule of law, which contains aspects like the government, parliament, public administration, constitution, and civilian oversight of security forces. During the early 2000s, Serbia encountered structural challenges, particularly in areas where competencies were divided between the State Union and the republics.<sup>63</sup> Following the peaceful separation from Montenegro, Serbia's political situation improved. In 2006, a new constitution was adopted that involves provisions on human and minority rights, civilian oversight of security forces, and laid the foundation for the establishment of the Ombudsman.<sup>64</sup> However, the Venice

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<sup>60</sup> Antonino Castaldo, "External Democracy Promotion in Time of Democratic Crisis: Linkage, Leverage, and Domestic Actors' Diversionary Behaviours", *East European Politics and Societies*, 36/1, 2022, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Radeljic, "Semi-Authoritarianism Accepted", 72.

<sup>62</sup> Adea Gafuri and Meltem Muftuler-Bac, "Caught between stability and democracy in the Western Balkans: a comparative analysis of paths of accession to the European Union", *East European Politics*, 37/2, 2020, 11.

<sup>63</sup> European Commission, *Communication from the Commission 2005 enlargement strategy paper*, COM (2005) 561 final. 2005a, 8.

<sup>64</sup> European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2006-2007 Including annexed special report on the EU's capacity to integrate new members*, COM (2006) 649, 2006, 6.

Commission noted that some provisions still fell below European standards.<sup>65</sup> Concerns remained about political influence in appointing judges, the impact of political parties on parliament, and territorial decentralization.<sup>66</sup> In 2008, legislation was enacted to grant Vojvodina a new status,<sup>67</sup> though the Kosovo issue remained sensitive.<sup>68</sup> Kosovo's declaration of independence fuelled nationalistic feelings, affecting parliamentary and governmental activities.<sup>69</sup>

Progress was observed in the judicial sector, yet political interference undermined its independence.<sup>70</sup> The Constitutional Court carried out its duties<sup>71</sup> and new institutions such as the High Judicial Council were established.<sup>72</sup> However, efforts were still needed to meet European standards. Coordination in public administration improved<sup>73</sup>, but transparency and accountability issues persisted. The Ministry for European Integration provided guidance for European integration and legislative alignment with the National Plan for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Venice Commission, *European Commission for Democracy Through Law Opinion on the Constitution of Serbia*, (No.405/2006), 2017, 3.

<sup>66</sup> COM (2006) 649, 6.

<sup>67</sup> European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2008-2009*, COM (2008) 674 final, 2008a, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Venice Commission, *European Commission for Democracy*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2008 Progress Report*, COM (2008) 674, 2008b, 48.

<sup>70</sup> COM (2005) 561 final, 2005a, 23.

<sup>71</sup> COM (2008) 674, 2008b, 49.

<sup>72</sup> European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2009-2010*, COM (2009) 533, 2009a, 55.

<sup>73</sup> European Commission, *Serbia Progress Report*, COM (2014) 700 final, 2014, 22.

<sup>74</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2018 Report*, COM (2018) 450 final, 2018, 9.

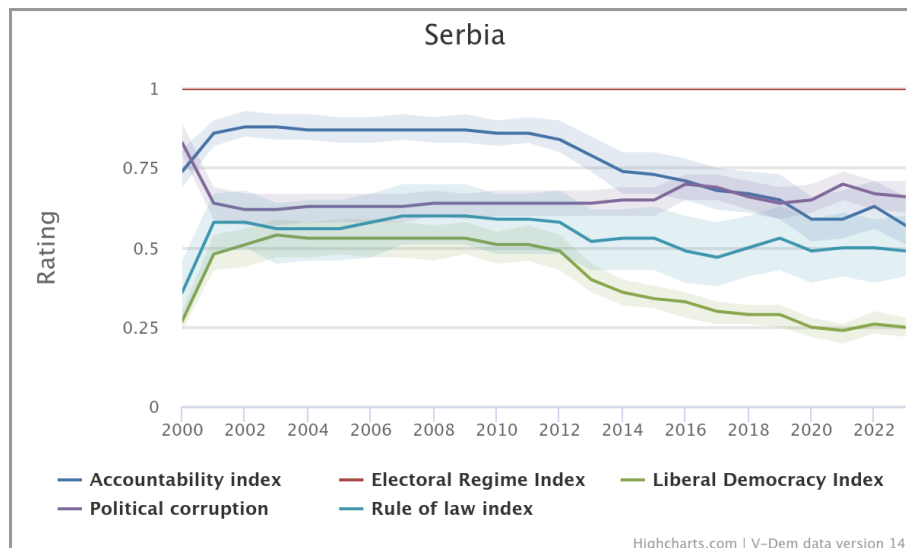


Figure 1: State of democratic elements in Serbia (Source: V-Dem Institute 2024)

The second category focuses on human rights and the protection of minority rights, covering access to justice, civil and political rights, economic and social rights, the prison system, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, media, and civil society. When Serbia joined the Council of Europe, authorities identified areas needing improvements, such as adopting the Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.<sup>75</sup> In 2008, the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights replaced the previous government human rights agency.<sup>76</sup> It promoted respect for human and minority rights, commemorating events like International Roma Day and International Day of Tolerance to raise awareness.<sup>77</sup> Yet, the European Court of Human Rights has continued to address violations of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>75</sup> European Commission, *Serbia and Montenegro 2005 Progress Report*, COM (2005) 561 final, 2005b, 17.

<sup>76</sup> COM (2008) 674 final, 2008a, 14.

<sup>77</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2009 Progress Report*, COM (2009) 533, 2009b, 13.

<sup>78</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2010 Progress Report*, COM (2010) 660 2010, 12.



Serbia, a multi-ethnic state with regions like Vojvodina and Sandzak, needs to establish tolerance and respect for human and minority rights. The Re-admission Agreement between Serbia and the EU for displaced persons and refugees entered into force in 2008.<sup>79</sup> The 2009 Law on Minority National Councils regulated the powers of national minority councils.<sup>80</sup> Despite some improvements, discrimination against minorities, especially Roma, persists.<sup>81</sup> Support for LGBTQ+ rights is insufficient, with pride parades often targeted by violence.<sup>82</sup>

In efforts to enhance access to justice, Serbia introduced a new Criminal Code and worked towards implementing the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture.<sup>83</sup> As part of reforms aimed at harmonising criminal law with European standards, the death penalty was abolished in 2002 and civil service and driving licence revocation were introduced.<sup>84</sup> Freedom of expression is constitutionally protected, but issues like death threats, hate speech, and attacks against journalists continue.<sup>85</sup>

Civil society organizations have played crucial roles in Serbia's democratic struggle and European integration. However, their involvement in decision-making processes is limited by institutional flaws and political influence.<sup>86</sup> There has been some progress in improving cooperation between the government and civil society. The Prime Minister initiated holding regular meetings with prominent civil society representatives<sup>87</sup> and the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society continued efforts to enhance the legal and institutional framework for civil society development.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> COM (2008) 674 final, 2008a, 20.

<sup>80</sup> COM (2009) 533 2009b, 17-18.

<sup>81</sup> COM (2010) 660, 17.

<sup>82</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2013 Progress Report*, COM (2013) 700 final 2013, 11.

<sup>83</sup> COM (2006) 649, 12.

<sup>84</sup> Milena Tripkovic, "Beyond punitiveness? Governance of crime and authoritarian heritage in Serbia", *Punishment & Society*, 18/3, 2016, 373-374.

<sup>85</sup> COM (2010) 660, 13.

<sup>86</sup> Bobic, "National Convention", 81-82.

<sup>87</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2015 Report*, COM (2015) 611 final, 2015, 7-8.

<sup>88</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2016 Report*, COM (2016) 715 final, 2016, 8.

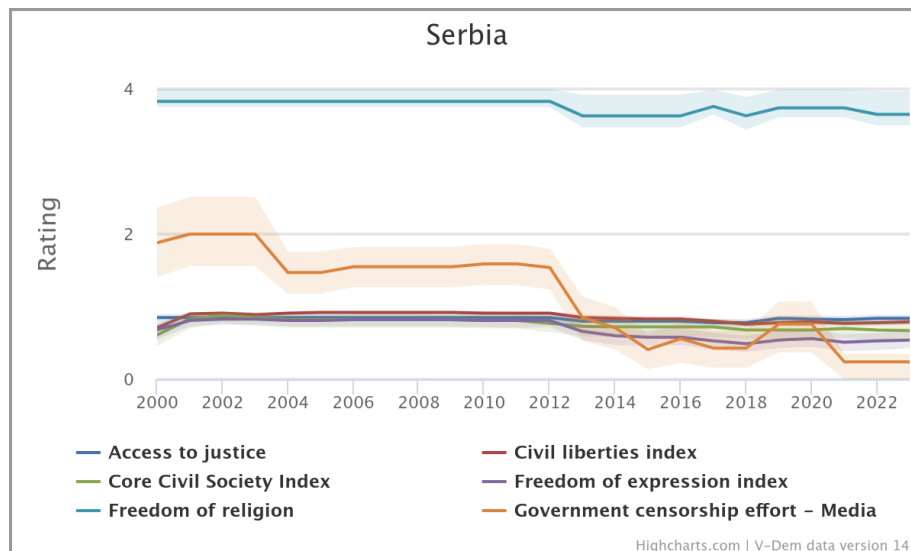


Figure 2: State of Civilian Rights in Serbia (Source: V-Dem Institute 2024)

The third category covers international obligations and regional issues, including compliance with peace agreements such as Dayton, normalization with Kosovo, cooperation with the ICTY, and regional cooperation. As a signatory to the Dayton/Paris Accords, as a member of the United Nations and as a candidate for EU membership, Serbia is obliged to co-operate and fulfil these demands.<sup>89</sup> In fact, the country had no major issues with the Dayton/Paris Agreements except for full cooperation with the ICTY. Authorities were firstly reluctant to locate, arrest, and deliver fugitives, although domestic war crimes prosecutions were efficient.<sup>90</sup> Eventually, Serbia made significant progress by delivering fugitives such as Ratko Mladic, Radovan Karadzic, Stojan Zupljanin, and Goran Hadzic.<sup>91</sup>

Serbia has been actively participating in regional initiatives like the South-East Europe Cooperation Process and supporting the Coalition for

<sup>89</sup> COM (2005) 561 final, 2005b, 22.

<sup>90</sup> COM (2006) 649, 16.

<sup>91</sup> Jelena Obradovic-Wochnik and Alexander Wochnik, "Europeanising the 'Kosovo Question': Serbia's Policies in the Context of EU Integration", *West European Politics*, 35/5, 2012, 1176.

Reconciliation Commission (RECOM).<sup>92</sup> The Kosovo issue remains a significant challenge. While the EU does not require Serbia to formally recognize Kosovo for membership, it does demand the normalization of relations and mutual cooperation. Notable progress was made in 2011 when Serbia and Kosovo entered into dialogue and reached agreements on key issues, including regional cooperation, Kosovo's representation, border management, freedom of movement, customs procedures, and the mutual recognition of diplomas.<sup>93</sup> Facilitated by the EU, this dialogue resulted in the 'Brussels Agreement,' which established plans for a Community of Serb Municipalities, a unified police force, and the integration of judicial authorities within Kosovo.<sup>94</sup> Subsequent agreements were reached in 2015, another major step towards normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo but their implementation has been slow and complicated by events such as Kosovo's imposition of customs duties on Serbian goods in 2018, and several other crisis including the ones on ID cards and license plates.<sup>95</sup>

In February 2023, Kosovo and Serbia agreed on the EU-mediated Ohrid Agreement, sparking hope for progress in resolving their longstanding dispute. However, implementation of the agreement has been minimal, with trust further eroded by actions from both sides and perceptions of EU double standards. This situation underscores the need for balanced mediation and a genuine internal commitment to peace from all parties involved.<sup>96</sup>

#### **IV. The Challenges of Democracy in the Republic of Serbia**

As noted above, since 2000, the EU has provided assistance and implemented comprehensive strategies to align Serbia with European standards. This section examines three EU-related factors that have contributed to the challenges in promoting democracy in Serbia.

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<sup>92</sup> COM (2015) 611 final, 20.

<sup>93</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2012 Progress Report*, COM (2012) 600 final, 2012, 19.

<sup>94</sup> COM (2013) 700 final, 5.

<sup>95</sup> European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document Serbia 2019 Report*, COM (2019) 260 final, 2019, 53.

<sup>96</sup> Marta Mucznik, "Normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo Must Come from Within," Welcome to EPC - European Policy Centre, July 18, 2023, <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Normalisation-between-Serbia-and-Kosovo-must-come-from-within~527b3c>.

The first factor relates to the EU's approach, which is not exclusive to Serbia but stems from a broader enlargement strategy targeting the entire Balkan region following the Yugoslav wars. Since the 2000s, the EU has relied on political conditionality as the primary tool to promote democracy, presenting it as the key solution to the challenges facing the Western Balkans.<sup>97</sup> However, Stratulat observed that the EU has fallen into the trap of viewing democracy as a silver bullet, which has inadvertently allowed a flawed status quo to persist. This approach has perpetuated the fragility of change and reform mechanisms in the region, undermining sustainable progress.<sup>98</sup> The EU's approach, while theoretically well-founded, is often inconsistent, prioritizing stability over democratic principles.

The EU's normative agenda aims to drive political transformation in Serbia by promoting the rule of law, judicial reforms, the fight against organized crime, and good neighbourly relations.<sup>99</sup> However, the EU often adopts a pragmatic approach that contradicts its normative agenda, particularly when confronted with instability. Its top-down, technocratic strategy for democracy promotion relies heavily on the cooperation of political elites in the target country.<sup>100</sup> When challenges emerge, the EU frequently turns to regional leaders, such as Vučić, thereby granting them significant leverage. As a result, these elites, who often pursue their own agendas in domestic politics, face minimal scrutiny from the EU. This practice, known as stabilocracy, undermines the EU's transformative efforts and fosters an inconsistent approach to its normative agenda.<sup>101</sup>

The second factor is the period of crises that prompted a shift in the EU's priorities. Born out of crises and turbulence, the EU initially emerged as a defensive project but gradually evolved into a complex political and economic actor.<sup>102</sup> The EU has learnt from these events, identified its flaws and reshaped itself as a new international player. Offering EU membership perspectives to the Western Balkans was part of this effort to preserve peace and stability

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<sup>97</sup> Corina Stratulat, "Democratisation Via Eu Integration: Fragile Resilience And Resilient Fragility", In S. Lange, Z. Nechev, & F. Trauner (Eds.), *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2017, 11.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Anastasakis, "The EU's political conditionality", 370.

<sup>100</sup> Stratulat, "Democratisation via EU", 14.

<sup>101</sup> Florian, Bieber, "The Rise (And Fall) of Balkan Stabilocracies" *Horizons*, 10, 2018b.

<sup>102</sup> Manuel Castells et al., *Europe's Crises*, Wiley, 2018, 22.

across Europe. However, since 2008, the EU has faced several crises, causing a shift in priorities and relegating the Western Balkans from its list of priorities. This shift negatively affected pro-Europeans and benefited authoritarians in the Western Balkans, deteriorating democratization.

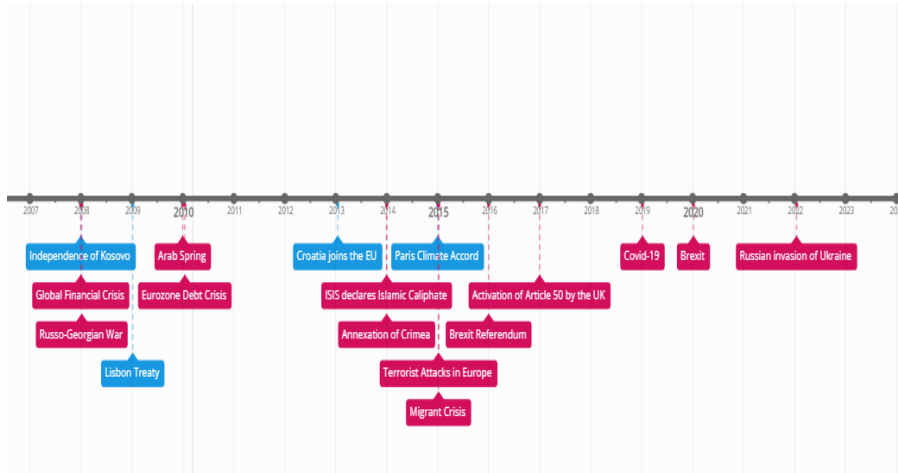


Figure 5: Crises period for the EU (Source: Author's own collection)

The Euro crisis marked the beginning of this period of crises. What started as a financial market crisis soon evolved into a fiscal crisis, raising questions about the euro's viability and the EU's capacity for crisis management.<sup>103</sup> Geopolitical crises in the Middle East and Russia further diverted attention and resources.<sup>104</sup> In 2015, uncontrolled migration across the Aegean Sea posed significant challenges, with EU institutions struggling to formulate common border security policies amid disagreements among member states.<sup>105</sup> Frontline and transit countries, such as Greece, Hungary, Slovenia, and Italy, were particularly affected. To address these challenges,

<sup>103</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism and the Crises of the European Union", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56/7, 2018, 1582.

<sup>104</sup> Castells et al., *Europe's Crises*, 26.

<sup>105</sup> Riddervold et al., "European Union Crisis: An Introduction", In M. Riddervold, J. Trondal, & A. Newsome (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 25.

the EU also required Balkan states to stop unwanted migrants within their borders, effectively transforming the region into a human corridor.<sup>106</sup>

In 2016, the Brexit referendum saw Britain decide to leave the EU, an unprecedented event that sparked widespread concerns about the future of the European project.<sup>107</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic further tested the EU's capabilities, initially faltering but eventually managing the crisis relatively well.<sup>108</sup> The EU has adapted to operating in a state of permanent crisis.<sup>109</sup>

Traditionally, the EU prioritizes a stable environment.<sup>110</sup> When these crises threatened its objectives of peace, stability, and prosperity, the EU focused on reducing immediate threats.<sup>111</sup> This pragmatic approach, prioritizing urgent issues over long-term goals, affected the Western Balkans' democratization process. In response to the shifting priorities, the EU launched the Berlin Process in 2014 to re-engage with the Western Balkan countries and presented a new strategy in 2018, signalling renewed focus on the Western Balkans.<sup>112</sup> However, Jean-Claude Juncker's announcement that there would be no further enlargement soon<sup>113</sup> implied that the Western Balkans were stuck in the EU's waiting room.

The third-EU related factor is opportunistic players, which supported the Western Balkans' EU integration,<sup>114</sup> using economic and political leverage to build strong ties with regional governments.<sup>115</sup> Unlike the EU, they offered

<sup>106</sup> Pavlos Gkasis and Marko Kmezić, "Contextualizing Refugee 'Crisis' and EU Integration: Interrelatedness and Mutual Reciprocity," In M. Kmezić, A. Prodromidou, P. Gkasis (Eds.), *Migration, EU Integration and the Balkan Route*, Routledge, 2024, 1–11, 7.

<sup>107</sup> Schimmelfennig, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism", 1588.

<sup>108</sup> Greer et al., "The Covid-19 Pandemic: Failing Forward in Public Health", In M. Riddervold, J. Trondal, & A. Newsome (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of EU Crises*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 747-748.

<sup>109</sup> Schimmelfennig, "Liberal Intergovernmentalism", 1578.

<sup>110</sup> Patrick Müller, "EU foreign policy: no major breakthrough despite multiple crises", *Journal of European Integration*, 38/3, 2016, 364.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 359.

<sup>112</sup> Matteo Bonomi, "Off Track. The EU's Re-engagement with the Western Balkans. Resilience in the Western Balkans", *IAI*, 19, 2019, 2-3.

<sup>113</sup> European Commission, *A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans*, COM (2018) 65 final, 2018b, 1.

<sup>114</sup> Zoran Nechev and Florian Trauner, "Fostering resilience in the Western Balkans", *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, 2017, 2.

<sup>115</sup> Kurt Bassuener, "Pushing On An Open Door Foreign Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans", *National Endowment for Democracy (NED)*, 2019, 2.

investments and partnerships without conditions, which appealed to the Western Balkans, leading to more diverse foreign direct investment.<sup>116</sup> While investment diversification is not intrinsically problematic, these new ties may begin to undermine democratic standards. Relations between Serbia and opportunistic players like Russia, Türkiye, and China, who ignore illiberal practices and share an interest in weak democratic safeguards, undermine the EU's influence.<sup>117</sup> As a result, Serbia's links with these actors have weakened the EU's democracy promotion efforts.

Russia, first opportunistic player, leverages its historical, religious, and cultural connections to the Balkan communities to exploit anti-Western sentiments and strengthen ties with local elites.<sup>118</sup> Although lacking a comprehensive strategy to counter the EU's enlargement policy, Russia focuses on key sectors such as energy, communication, media, and foreign policy to exert its influence in the region.<sup>119</sup> Using tools such as media, energy, religious institutions, security cooperation, cultural organizations, and NGOs, Russia exploits regional vulnerabilities to advance its influence in the Balkans.<sup>120</sup> In Serbia, Russia has significantly increased its economic influence, particularly in the energy sector. Gazprom's acquisition of the Serbian state oil company NIS in 2008 highlights this dominance.<sup>121</sup> Russia also strengthened Serbia's military capabilities, donating six MiG-29 fighter jets in 2018.<sup>122</sup> Disinformation is another tool Russia employs, with Serbian access to Russian news outlets like Russia Today and Sputnik, as well as magazines such as R Magazin and Nedeljnik.<sup>123</sup>

Russia's staunch opposition to Kosovo's independence remains a pivotal factor in its relationship with Serbia, as it aligns with Serbia's national priorities and bolsters bilateral ties. By amplifying pro-Russian and anti-

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<sup>116</sup> Walter Kemp, "Stuck in the EU's Eternal Waiting Room", *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, 19, 2021, 197.

<sup>117</sup> Bassuener, "Pushing on", 2.

<sup>118</sup> Asya Metodjeva, "Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans", GMF Policy Paper (No.16), 2019, 3.

<sup>119</sup> Nechev and Trauner, "Fostering resilience", 2.

<sup>120</sup> Dimitav Bechev, "The Russian Challenge in Southeast Europe", In M. K. D. Cross & I. P. Karolewski (Eds.), *European-Russian Power Relations in Turbulent Times*, University of Michigan Press, 2021, 188.

<sup>121</sup> Bassuener, "Pushing on", 8.

<sup>122</sup> Metodjeva, "Russian Narrative", 4.

<sup>123</sup> European Parliament, "Serbia's cooperation with China, the European Union, Russia and the United States of America", 2017, p.13; Metodjeva, "Russian Narrative", 5.

Western narratives through local actors, Russia secures support from both the Serbian government and segments of the public. This relationship dynamic persisted even after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with Serbia resisting substantial pressure from the European Union to impose sanctions on Moscow. Instead, Serbian officials and Serbian media frequently attributed responsibility for the conflict to NATO or the United States, underscoring a clear divergence from the EU's predominant narrative.<sup>124</sup>

The second opportunistic player is Türkiye. Historically, Türkiye and Serbia were adversaries, with Ottoman rule fuelling Serbian nationalism.<sup>125</sup> Recently, Türkiye's re-engagement with the Balkans, driven by the Justice and Development Party and Ahmet Davutoğlu's "strategic depth" and "zero problems with neighbours" policies, aimed to position Türkiye as a leader in former Ottoman territories.<sup>126</sup> Türkiye's pragmatic approach leveraged the Ottoman legacy and Turkish minorities in the Balkans.<sup>127</sup> However, Ottomanism lacked resonance in Serbia, improving relations only when both countries adopted a rational perspective, committing to a 'strategic partnership'.<sup>128</sup>

Economic interests became paramount, with Serbia becoming Türkiye's largest trading partner in the Western Balkans by 2019. Turkish investments in Serbia span banking, motorways, and energy.<sup>129</sup> They signed a Free Trade Agreement and an Agreement on Infrastructure Cooperation.<sup>130</sup> Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's leadership style is notably similar to Erdoğan's. Büyük and Öztürk noted, "Serbia's strongman President Aleksander Vučić is another Erdoğan best man".<sup>131</sup> While Türkiye supports the Euro-Atlantic

<sup>124</sup> Sabrina P. Ramet and Aleksander Zdravkovski, "Serbia and the War in Ukraine", *Insight Turkey*, 24/3, 2022; Roberto Belloni, "Serbia between East and West: Ontological Security, Vicarious Identity and the Problem of Sanctions against Russia", *European Security*, 33/2, 2023.

<sup>125</sup> Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in The Western Balkans", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2019, 2.

<sup>126</sup> Aydıntaşbaş, "From Myth to Reality", 4; Bassuener, "Pushing on", 11.

<sup>127</sup> Birgül Demirtaş, "Turkey and the Balkans: Overcoming Prejudices, Building Bridges and Constructing a Common Future", *Perceptions*, 18/2, 2013, 166.

<sup>128</sup> "Relations between Turkey and Serbia", 2011.

<sup>129</sup> Hamdi Fırat Büyük & Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "The Role of Leadership Networks in Turkey- Balkan Relations in the AKP Era", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 18/3, 2019, 124.

<sup>130</sup> "Relations between Turkey and Serbia", 2011.

<sup>131</sup> Büyük and Öztürk, "The Role of Leadership", 123.



integration of the Western Balkans, Erdoğan's close ties with Balkan autocrats, especially Vučić, may undermine democratic values.<sup>132</sup>

The last opportunistic player is China, whose influence in the Western Balkans has grown significantly. Serbia considers itself China's closest ally in Europe, valuing Chinese support in not recognizing Kosovo's independence and its veto power in the UN Security Council.<sup>133</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has strengthened this relationship further, with China using economic power to expand its influence and presence through the '16+1' format, part of its global strategy.<sup>134</sup>

China views the Western Balkans as a gateway to EU markets and invests heavily in regional infrastructure to bridge developmental gaps. Serbia, a key partner, has received over \$1 billion in Chinese investments, primarily through loans, for projects like the Sino-Serbian Friendship Bridge and a steel plant in Smederevo.<sup>135</sup> Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić promotes these investments, citing economic growth and job creation.<sup>136</sup> Major Chinese companies, including Huawei and Bank of China, have established a strong presence in Belgrade, further solidifying ties.

In 2021, Serbia reinforced its cooperation with China through projects like the €4.4 billion Belgrade metro initiative involving Chinese and French companies. Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China provided critical assistance, including substantial vaccine deliveries, surpassing EU aid in the early stages. This support significantly bolstered China's image in Serbia, with 56% of the population in April 2021 identifying China as the most helpful partner in addressing the crisis. Serbia's growing alignment with China extends beyond economics, encompassing military procurement, support for Chinese positions on Tibet and Xinjiang, and the adoption of Chinese digital infrastructure, drawing criticism from the European Union. However, the EU

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<sup>132</sup> Aydıntaşbaş, "From Myth to Reality", 4.

<sup>133</sup> Philippe Le Corre, "Serbia: The Open-Door Balkan Space", In *China's Rise as a Geoeconomic Influencer: Four European Case Studies*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018, 29.

<sup>134</sup> Plamen Tonchev, "China's Road: into the Western Balkans", *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, 2017, 1-2.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 1-2.

<sup>136</sup> Le Corre, "Serbia: The Open-Door", 31.

has struggled to counterbalance China's influence, constrained by its own intricate trade relations with Beijing.<sup>137</sup>

Chinese investments appeal to Serbia and other Balkan countries due to fewer conditions compared to EU funds, aligning well with local political elites.<sup>138</sup> However, this raises concerns about extending economic influence into political influence, as China's agenda does not prioritize good governance or EU standards.<sup>139</sup> There is debate that financing from authoritarian countries can reinforce undemocratic practices and corruption, especially in nations with weak democratic institutions. Given Serbia's transparency and accountability issues, China's potential political influence is troubling.

### Conclusion

Acknowledging the importance of democracy for peace and stability in Europe, the EU began its democracy promotion activities in the 1970s. Initially part of its enlargement policy, these efforts eventually extended to nearly all EU policies. True to its normative identity, the EU developed effective tools and approaches to spread its norms and values. To bridge the gap between capability and expectation, the EU applied these methods in various regions, with the Balkans becoming a primary focus. This study aimed to review the EU's democracy promotion efforts in Serbia and to understand why these efforts have failed.

After the Yugoslav wars, the EU began promoting democracy in the Western Balkans with the aim of transforming the region. The credibility and success of the EU's foreign policy depended on the democratization and revitalization of these countries. The Thessaloniki Summit in 2003 emphasized the enlargement process as crucial for promoting political and democratic transformation in the region, offering a membership perspective in line with the Copenhagen Criteria and additional criteria. Serbia, like other Balkan countries, had to manage democratization alongside the accession process.

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<sup>137</sup> Mladen Lišanin, "Prospects of European-Chinese Contest for Influence in the Western Balkans: The Case of Serbia", In F. Attinà & Y. Feng (Eds.), *China and World Politics in Transition How China Transforms the World Political Order*, Springer, 2023, 201-204.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>139</sup> Wouter Zweers et al., "China and the EU in the Western Balkans: A zero-sum game?", *Clingendael Institute*, 2020, 43.

Despite these efforts, the state of democracy in Serbia indicates that something is amiss. This paper identifies three factors behind the EU's failure: the EU's inconsistent approach, a shift in focus during crises, and the influence of opportunistic actors. These interconnected factors have raised doubts, leading to increased scepticism about the EU's credibility and promises. Although the EU's perspective and attitude toward the region remain unchanged, its lowered priority and overlooking of certain issues for stability could have dangerous consequences. Despite over 20 years in the Balkans, the EU has not achieved its primary objective of transforming the region's countries.

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