

**EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS:
INCREASING GEOPOLITICAL STABILITY THROUGH ECONOMIC
AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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ABSTRACT

The former communist countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe at present are mostly NATO/EU member states. The Western Balkans have a European perspective. However, the economic situation in the Western Balkans is not optimistic, with bleak prospects for rapid economic development. The GDP per capita of the “most developed” Western Balkans state (Montenegro) is still lower than the GDP of Bulgaria, the least developed EU member state. It is not likely that the investment boom and GDP growth experienced in the Visegrad Four and Baltic States in the pre-accession period will be repeated. Demographic challenges in some of the Western Balkans countries are staggering (as well as in the Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Croatia). With the possible accession to the EU, the emigration from the Western Balkans countries would most likely increase due to the opening of the labour market in the EU member states. If socio-economic development is not comprehensively encouraged, substantially financed and meticulously audited by the EU, poor economic results and negative demographic impacts of the domestic situation will continue, and external players (Russia and China in particular) will continue to strengthen their economic and political influence in the region. The Bulgarian and Romanian presidencies of the EU have put the Western Balkans rather high on the list of EU’s priorities, with the interim Austrian presidency giving support to the faster

integration as well. In the first half of the 2020, the Croatian presidency has, considering the geographic proximity, as well as historical experience and contemporary ties of Croatia to the region, continued with putting the issue on the EU's agenda. What could be the major implications of the accession to the EU for the Western Balkans countries?

Key words: The Western Balkans, the European Union (the EU), Russia, China, geopolitics, demographic indicators, economic performance.

INTRODUCTION

The former communist countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe at present are mostly NATO/EU member states. The Western Balkans countries have a European perspective, stated in various documents of the EU. However, the economic situation in the Western Balkans is not optimistic, with bleak prospects for rapid economic development. The GDP per capita of the “most developed” Western Balkans state (Montenegro) is still lower than the GDP of Bulgaria, the least developed EU member state. It is not probable that the investment boom and GDP growth experienced in the Visegrad Four and Baltic States in the pre-accession period will be repeated. Demographic challenges in some of the Western Balkans countries are staggering (as well as in the Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Croatia). With the possible accession to the EU, the emigration from all Western Balkans countries would most likely increase; hence gradual or instant opening of the EU labour market has been the most significant factor influencing the demographic characteristics of post-communist EU members.

The Western Balkans in the past decade has been experiencing a steady, continuous rise of the non-EU, non-Western originated external influence. Numerous evidences to support this claim can be found in the intensity of activities from major non-EU, non-Western actors, mainly Russia, China, and Turkey. The connections that have been intensified are visible in the area of political connections and alliances, military ties (such as for example the procurement of Russian weapons from Serbia), and economic ties (Russian, Chinese and Turkish investments in several countries of the region, with the focus on Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina). Although the accession of Montenegro to NATO has shown that the West still considers the

Western Balkans as a region of importance, with the accession of North Macedonia to the Alliance confirming the thesis, the influence of non-EU, non-Western afore-mentioned major players should not be disregarded and certainly will not cease.

Consequently, if socio-economic development in the Western Balkans is not comprehensively encouraged, partially financed and meticulously audited by the EU, poor economic results and negative demographic impacts of situation within the state will continue, and external players (Russia and China in particular) will continue to strengthen their economic and political influence in the region, bringing the importance role of geopolitics and geo-economics in the Western Balkans, a region that might be at its crossroads. It will either continue its path towards the EU, or it will become, or at least some of its countries will, more similar to the European Neighbourhood countries, with powerful and rising non-EU external influences, originating from Russia, Turkey, and China.

Therefore, it is the main intention of this paper to show the perspectives of external influence in the Western Balkans on the perspectives of the region's European integration – and to answer the question whether the EU's policy of conditionality, if modified, would bring the countries closer to the EU, concurrently drawing them away from the already mentioned non-Western, non-EU actors that are active in the Region.

GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: A FACTOR THAT HINDERS THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION BUT COULD ACCELERATE IT

The distinction between the "Western Balkans" as an unstable area of most of the former Yugoslavia, including Albania, and other parts of the Balkans, where conflicts lasted or had just ended, and the prospect of a path to European and Euro-Atlantic integration was almost non-existent. in the mid-1990s and remains present in political and geopolitical discourse to this day. The term "Western Balkans" started to be used as a label for the area of the former Yugoslavia, plus Albania, minus Slovenia (which early found the right path towards European integration and became the most successful transition country). The credit for the emergence of the term actually

goes to the EU's policy towards that area, primarily referring to the former Yugoslavia, after its disintegration in 1991. With the separation of Slovenia from the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the territorial scope of the term was narrowed, but at the same time enlarged Albania, especially after the unrest in Albania in 1997. In political terms, the term "Western Balkans" was developed into a concept after 1997, and in official documents of the EU, following the establishment of a special regional commission of the Council of Ministers of the Union for the Western Balkans¹.

From all the mentioned reasons, it is very important to delimit and understand that since the start of the former Yugoslavia's breakup there are actually two Balkans, as Metushaj (2018: 142) states "Since 1990, in the Balkans we have almost "two Balkans". The successful Balkans in the process of Euro-Atlantic integration and the unintegrated or semi-integrated Balkans. The integrated Balkans is the eastern and southern part, while the unintegrated Balkans is the Western Balkans, exactly that part of the region where Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and North Macedonia are located. So, it is not the geographical position that gives the name to this region, but the need for an essential distinction of countries in this part of the Balkans, to give a politically correct name to a subregion that is not Yugoslavia or Albania anymore, but in fact nowhere else".

From the geographical and geopolitical point of view of this "post conflict area", the most correct is to name it the Western Balkans. The fact is the further strengthening of ethno-nationalisms and continuous straining of bilateral relations: "Since the introduction of multi-partisan political systems in the early 1990s, the WB have experienced a variety of 'hybrid regimes' (Collier and Levitsky, 1997) falling in the wide spectrum between consolidated democracies and autocracies, yet never reaching the standing of fully consolidated liberal democracies" (Kmezic, 2020: 1).

It is widely believed that all the mentioned problems from the perspective of the Western Balkans countries should be solved with their full EU membership. On the other hand, the EU, if it wants to maintain political and economic supremacy in this part of Europe, must seriously draw up a new, wider access strategies for countries that aspire to EU membership.

¹ European Commission trade policy, Western Balkans, <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/western-balkans/>

“Enlargement is considered to be the EU’s most efficient foreign policy instrument in terms of its ability to transform existing practices and institutional structures outside of its borders. Less is known about how it works on the ground in specific contexts. Despite high leverage at the general level and the efforts of monitoring, for example through the meticulous assessment in the Commission’s annual progress reports, a large part of the enlargement literature shares the view that the EU’s record in spreading human rights and democratic norms in a credible and effective fashion during the accession process is mixed at best” (Huszka and Körtvelyesi, 2017: 4).

“Political conditionality is the major instrument through which the EU has sought to foster democratic reforms in the Western Balkans. The strict application of ‘carrots and sticks’ with the membership perspective at its core yielded major steps forwards, confirmed not least by Croatia’s accession to the EU in July 2013². Still, the EU has not been able to reproduce its success story from the Central and Eastern European (CEE) enlargement in the Western Balkans” (Richter and Wunsch, 2020: 41-42).

As far as the general public opinion is concerned According to Jovic (2018: 6, 15-17), there is “an open rejection of pro-EU policies by significant segments of public opinion in Serbia and in the Republic of Srpska, Bosnia-Herzegovina. On the contrary, there is much enthusiasm and support for the West in general and the EU in particular in predominately non-Slavic countries, Kosovo and Albania.” To this we can also add the overwhelming affections for the separation from Bosnia-Herzegovina, de facto the end of this state as such, that exist among the Bosnian Serbs, as well as, although not so expressed, among the Bosnian Croats. These separatist tendencies ultimately would (de facto if not de iure) result in the unification of the Republic of Srpska with Serbia, and the Croat-dominated parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina with Croatia. Due to inability to pursue these goals, the political elite of Bosnian Croats has opted for the next best thing – the accession of Bosnia-Herzegovina to NATO and to the EU, which would lower the sense of endangerment and frustrations that arise from the majorization from the Bosniaks in the

² Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2019) have developed the External Incentives Model (EIM), in order to explain the Europeanization of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) through the EU’s accession conditionality. The authors have also applied the Model to study the EU’s impact in two additional contexts: post-accession developments in the CEECs and the Southeast European countries currently in the accession process. The authors state that the credibility of incentives stands out as a crucial condition for the success of EU conditionality.

Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although the visions for the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina of the leaders of Bosnian Serbs and Croats are very different, if not totally opposing, they agree on one thing, and that is the opposition towards any centralization of the state. In this particular case, the rule “an enemy of my enemy is my friend” again verifies itself, this time producing a geopolitical tension including the external and internal political instability. Present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina, considering the way it is now constituted and governed, is a state in which the majority of two (Croats, Serbs) out of total three constituent nations do not want to live. It is a reality that produces political tension and instability, which immediately and without any doubt includes neighbouring countries Croatia and Serbia, therefore producing geopolitical instability that threatens the stability of a significant part of the Western Balkans, and includes one EU member state as well.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterized by a complicated political system, a bloody history, a lack of will, vision and determination by the ruling political elites in all three constituent peoples for progress. The citizens of both entities (the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republic of Srpska) resigned and lethargic because the standard of living is falling, reforms are being implemented poorly, power for months after the election does not constitute, nor no responsibility or rebellion to the public or the reactions of citizens and non-governmental organizations of the fact. Another problem is the large emigration from Bosnia-Herzegovina, especially of young and educated people. Since the 1991 census, about 1.5 million citizens have left Bosnia-Herzegovina or have been forced to leave. Despite the difficult economic and social situation things further complicated by constant political crises that block the progress of the country.

The popularity of the EU in Serbia has declined since most of the EU member states recognized Kosovo in 2008 and 2009. If one analyses further the results of recent public opinion polls in Serbia, one can conclude that Kosovo represents the key red line in public perception of Serbia’s relationship with the EU. Furthermore, it is used by conservative, pro-Russian forces to pressurise government into a more cautious policy on Europeanisation (Jovic, 2018: 21). Concurrently, Russia and China, as desired allies, enjoy high levels of popularity.

Pejovic (2018: 87) emphasizes a clear pattern of connection between respective external influences and their counterparts – allies in the region. Consequently, the Russian influence in the Western Balkans is dominant in the countries with a majority of Orthodox (Serbian and Montenegrin) population, and not so much in North Macedonia. Nevertheless, Montenegro has broke from that influence with its accession to NATO, and therefore trying to limit the influence of Russia to the economic sphere. As the country is expected to proceed towards the membership in the EU, Russian economic influence should also become relatively smaller. Nevertheless, the current government is not so pro-NATO as the former one. It is highly doubtful that if this government was in power a couple of years ago, would it pursue NATO membership. Pejovic also discusses the influence of official Turkey i.e. Ankara on Albania, Kosovo and especially Bosniak controlled part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The abandonment of Turkey (and the pursuit of Neo-Ottomanism agenda) of the path that led to a possible future EU integration also brought in a new element in the relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans.

THE DIALECTIC RELATION BETWEEN ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS COUNTRIES

The demographic exodus from the Western Balkans, present and future, is a reality, which will only be more serious, considering the region's economic stagnation and backwardness, compared to the EU (even to the most its post-socialist members) and the lower level of wages, higher level of corruption and nepotism (clientelism), and social insecurity (all these parameters have to be compared with the EU in general and especially its most developed member states). This more recent demographic exodus is, unlike in the 1990's, when it was a consequence of wars, a result of poor economic performance of the Western Balkans countries, which in that sense resemble their neighbour countries, Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia (and these three countries are much more alike and more similar to the Western Balkans countries than they are to other EU member countries, when it comes to economic performance, developmental perspectives, corruption of the public sector etc.).

Table 1: GNI per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$) of the post-socialist EU member states and the Western Balkans states in 2008 and 2019

State	2008	2019	Index 2019/2008=100
Bulgaria	16 907	22 793	134.8
Croatia	24 593	28 164	114.5
Czech Republic	32 605	38 351	117.6
Estonia	28 199	36 094	128.0
Hungary	24 371	32 064	131.6
Latvia	24 409	30 445	124.7
Lithuania	26 004	35 944	138.2
Poland	22 088	31 913	144.5
Romania	21 591	29 507	136.7
Slovak Republic	25 723	30 331	117.9
Slovenia	35 292	38 461	109.0

Albania	10 163	13 588	133.7
Bosnia and Herzegovina	11 467	14 904	130.0
Kosovo	8 261	11 629	140.7
Montenegro	17 570	21 489	122.3
North Macedonia	12 826	14 914	116.3
Serbia	14 257	17 244	120.9

Source of data: World Bank Country Indicators.

Table 2. GNI per capita 2019, PPP (constant 2017 international \$) of the most desired European countries of economic migrants from the post-socialist Central and South-East European countries (EU and non-EU member states)

Country	GNI per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$)
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Austria	56 463
Germany	55 015
Ireland	65 762
Sweden	54 575
Switzerland	66 046
United Kingdom	45 870

From the previous two tables, it is clear that the difference in GNI per capita, as one economic indicator given here, is still sufficient enough, especially between the Western Balkans countries and the countries from Table 2, to boost out migration from the region. There are of course additional factors that are fuelling this trend – pre-COVID-19 crisis relative abundance of jobs in these countries compared to the relative number of jobs in the home countries of the migrants, better social and health security for the families, better social climate. Due to economic difficulties and social injustices (corruption, nepotism, clientelism, criminally-led privatization of state property etc.) that are causing this massive demographic exodus, compensatory mechanisms for avoiding a total demographic disaster and thereby giving a region at least some economic and in general social perspective, provided by the EU in pre-accession and post-accession period, should be implemented as soon as possible. Cohesion policy of the EU will not suffice in dealing with this long-term structural problem. These compensatory mechanisms should be targeted, comprehensive, rationalized and rational, addressing the most vulnerable groups in the societies and giving them incentives to stay in their home countries. The Western Balkans countries are clearly not capable, nor will they likely be, to perform these measures alone, and it can be fairly said that the experience of the Baltic States, as well as Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania, shows that these countries, most of which are small or medium-sized (except Romania) and vulnerable, were and still are unable to cope with this demographic exodus.

Table 3: The population, total population change, and net migration of the post-socialist EU member states and the Western Balkans countries 1988-2019

Post-socialist EU member state	Population, thousands, 2019	Population, thousands (peak year)	Total demographic loss, peak year – end of 2019, thousands (percentage)	Net migration, 1988-end of 2017
Bulgaria	6 976	8 981 (1988)	-2 005 (-22.3)	-732 034
Croatia	4 068	4 780 (1990)	-712 (-14.9)	-457 563
Czech Republic	10 670	/	/	604 343
Estonia	1 327	1 569 (1990)	-242 (-15.4)	-181 700
Hungary	9 770	10 712 (1981)	-942 (-8.8)	355 278
Latvia	1 913	2 667 (1989)	-754 (-28.2)	-529 670
Lithuania	2 787	3 704 (1991)	-917 (-24.8)	-779 379
Poland	37 971	38 660 (1999)	-689 (-1.8)	-878 100
Romania	19 357	23 202 (1990)	-3 845 (-16.6)	-3 192 850
Slovak Republic	5 454	/	/	16 806
Slovenia	2 088	/	/	70 944

Albania	2 854	3 287 (1990)	-433 (-13.2)	-1 220 373
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3 301	4 508 (1988)	-1 207 (-26.8)	-1 220 310

Kosovo	1 794	2 086 (1997)	-292 (-14.0)	n/a
Montenegro	622	/	/	-58 431
North Macedonia	2 083	/	/	-145 928
Serbia	6 945	7 735 (1994)	-790 (-10.2)	-880 269

Source of data: World Bank Country Indicators.

It is visible from Table 3 that more than half of the post-communist EU members are facing serious demographic challenges, with the Western Balkans countries facing mostly similar challenges, with North Macedonia and Montenegro as the hitherto exceptions. In the Baltic States, the influence of de facto decolonization, resulting in the beginning of the return of significant portions of Russian populations back to Russia. Besides these processes that are a result of historical events and had nothing to do with the accession to the EU, gradual or instant opening of the EU labour market (depending on the decisions of the particular EU member states after the EU enlargements of 2004, 2007, and 2013, respectively) has been the most significant factor that influences the demographic characteristics. With the possible future accession to the EU, the emigration from all Western Balkans countries will probably increase, if these countries will follow the path of the post-communist EU members, hence gradual or instant opening of the EU labour market has been the most significant factor that influences the demographic characteristics of the post-communist EU members. The second factor, with primarily economic implications (besides the EU accession) that has negatively influenced the demographics of the analysed countries was the Great Recession that hit the Baltic States the worst (in the most challenging year for the economies, 2009) and Croatia the longest.

In 2007, the Western Balkans countries joined the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA): “Western Balkans countries have some comparative advantages for a range of their products and services that could penetrate EU markets and beyond. However, they still need to improve their productivity by investing in skills and new technology and to accelerate their exports by introducing new products and following external market trends. The recent trade data

suggest that some WB countries expanded their market shares in the EU, of which Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina benefited the most due to their larger production base, followed by North Macedonia, whereas the other three countries lagged behind. Yet, despite recent expansion of exports, the WB countries remain poorly integrated into EU market” (Qorraaj and Jusufi, 2018: 56).

According to *Emerging Europe* portal “In Central Asia and Eastern Europe, slowing activity in Russia could reduce remittances, which account for an important portion of income in countries including Moldova and Ukraine. In Europe and Central Asia, worsening demographic trends – including the shrinking size of the working-age population – add to these challenges.” More than just sheer numbers on population loss, the data on “brain drain” show even bleaker perspective for most of the Central European post-socialist countries as well as for the Western Balkans countries: “55% of people with higher education from Bosnia and Herzegovina live abroad, and this figure is over 40 % of the educated populations of Armenians and Latvians, and close to 40% for Albania, Moldova, North Macedonia and Romania.”³

Unfortunately, rather non-impressive economic results of Croatia are more comparable to the ones of the Western Balkans countries and Bulgaria than to the other post-socialist EU member states, and are therefore increasing the demographic outflow of the most productive parts of the population. Also, demographic issues will haunt the Western Balkans in the long-term period, same as they haunt post-socialist EU members. It is necessary to scrutinize the experience of Croatia, as the most recent EU member state, regarding demographic and economic issues after its accession to the EU, as a precursor for the Western Balkans countries.

As the previously presented statistics shows, for Central European post-socialist countries, approaching the EU meant an imminent, significant increase in the GDP per capita, FDI and other important economic indicators. However, this integration was done in a different period, before the Great Recession. Substantial problems with the integration to the EU surfaced in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania, which were put under close monitoring due to low transparency

³ <https://emerging-europe.com/business/migration-raises-brain-drain-concerns-for-many-cee-countries-as-regional-economy-slows/>.

of EU funding spending. Due to previous experience and increased enlargement fatigue, Croatia faced higher criteria for membership, and all its chapters had benchmarks.

CONCLUSION

The Western Balkans are of less relevance to the EU than they were 10 or 15 years ago, due to internal problems of the EU and the “enlargement fatigue”. The Western Balkans are at a certain dividing line, whereby it can either really and not only declaratively continue its path towards European integration or have only a declarative perspective, and in reality, be in a similar position to the Eastern Partnership countries, with up to a certain point developed relations with the EU, but without a real membership perspective. The arguments for the EU membership based solely on the fact that if the EU does not admit the Western Balkans countries, external players will exert greater influence are not correct, hence the impacts already exist and the Western Balkan countries are not strategically important enough to just for that reason admitted to membership. Especially hence when it comes to strategic concerns, NATO is already present through full membership of Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia and the membership of all countries that surround the Western Balkans region. Support to NATO membership of Kosovo is very high, and Bosnia-Herzegovina has, with the acceptance into the NATO’s Membership Action Plan (MAP) made a step further towards full NATO membership. Therefore, Serbia remains the only state that is firmly opposed to NATO membership and declares itself as neutral in military terms. Nevertheless, due to NATO’s presence and encirclement of the region with NATO member states, the spread of possible conflicts and the impact of outside influence are still limited. However, that does not exclude the fact that relevant geopolitical tensions exist in the region, primarily resulting in the fact that the Western Balkans today are much more threatened by the implosion and the fall into irrelevance for Europe regarding the processes of the European integration (this has already happened in a certain way) than by the spread of conflict across the whole or even less likely, outside the region. The region faces a serious jeopardy of being left outside the door of the EU, at least by the end of the current

decade. The possibility that in 2030 all of the Western Balkans countries will still not be EU member states does not seem vague. It seems rather realistic.

The conditionality in the process is necessary but it is doubtful will it help or it will simply hinder the process further: “Since the enlargement process of Central Eastern European countries, conditionality started to be shaped as a tool for the accession process of the target state, with the aim of transforming the governing structures, the economy and the civil society of the (potential) candidate countries. In the broader sense this meant to be a strategy in which a reward is either granted or withheld depending on the fulfilment of an attached condition” (Rushaj, 2015: 468). This basically points us to the systems of rewards and setbacks in the process of pre-accession of the Western Balkans to the EU.

Petrovic (2020), mentioning “sticks and carrots”, suggests a possibility that the reasons why post-communist transformation in the Western Balkan countries has been less successful—although these countries have also received the EU’s invitation for accession, do not primarily stem (as often emphasised by EU officials and some scholars) from the structural inabilities of the Western Balkan countries to adopt the EU’s values and norms, but rather from inconsistencies in the accession conditions and some EU policy incentives towards these countries.

In the Western Balkans, regional integration is not showing in a pace and amount that could guarantee that the region will not again be dragged into conflicts, and the influence of external (outside EU) players is continuously strong. All of this means that the region needs to be supported, monitored and fostered by the EU in its way to more stability and prosperity. Naturally, much of these future possibilities also depend on the will of the people and the results of the elections in the respective countries of the region, hence these will also be real indicators of the path that the societies want to take and of the real willingness and preparedness for the reforms, which cannot and should not be imposed only from Brussels.

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