WESTERN BALKAN'S POLICY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract

The Western Balkans have long been a region of ethnic and sectarian tensions, compounded by historical grievances and territorial disputes. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the European Union (EU) developed policies aimed at stabilizing the region and promoting integration. This article examines the EU's strategic framework for the Western Balkans, highlighting the successes and enduring challenges in fostering stability and governance. This study hypothesizes that despite external pressures from geopolitical actors, internal governance challenges—such as corruption, weak institutions, and the rule of law—hinder the Western Balkans' EU integration. Through an analysis of crucial EU initiatives and responses, the article concludes that while the EU's efforts have advanced stability, effective integration requires significant domestic reforms within Balkan states.

Keywords: *Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina, European Union, Western Balkans, Yugoslavia.*

Avrupa Birliği'nin Batı Balkanlar Politikası

Özet

Batı Balkanlar uzun zamandır etnik ve mezhepsel gerginliklerin yaşandığı, tarihi şikayetler ve bölgesel anlaşmazlıklarla dolu bir bölge olmuştur. Yugoslavya'nın dağılmasının ardından Avrupa Birliği (AB) bölgede istikrarı sağlamaya ve entegrasyonu teşvik etmeye yönelik politikalar geliştirmiştir. Bu makale, AB'nin Batı Balkanlar'a yönelik stratejik çerçevesini inceleyerek, istikrar ve yönetişimi teşvik etmede hem başarıları hem de süregelen zorlukları vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışma, jeopolitik aktörlerden gelen dış baskılara rağmen, Batı Balkanlar'ın AB entegrasyonunu engelleyenin öncelikle yolsuzluk, zayıf kurumlar ve hukukun üstünlüğü gibi iç yönetişim sorunları olduğunu varsaymaktadır. Makale, AB'nin kilit girişimlerini ve bunlara verilen yanıtları analiz ederek, AB'nin çabaları istikrarı ilerletmiş olsa da, etkili entegrasyonun Balkan devletlerinde önemli iç reformlar gerektirdiği sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Balkanlar, Bosna Hersek, Avrupa Birliği, Batı Balkanlar, Yugoslavya.*

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Introduction

The Balkans, characterized by their rugged landscape and strategic significance, have historically been a center of geopolitical conflict. The region's complex topography has profoundly affected its socio-political dynamics, leading to the emergence of numerous local factions and nationalist movements; the intrinsic ethnic, religious, and sectarian diversity has further complicated governance, especially during periods of political instability (Naumovski, 2019). As the Ottoman Empire declined, adjacent states instigated uprisings, establishing nation-states, including Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania. This historical fragmentation established enduring divisions, exacerbating territorial disputes and identity-driven wars that continued into the 20th century.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s exacerbated the fragmentation of the Western Balkans. Nationalist groups, fueled by the power vacuum created by Yugoslavia's dissolution, intensified pre-existing ethnic and religious conflicts (Naumovski, 2019). Violent wars, such as the Bosnian War and the Kosovo crisis, arose from these differences, leading to ethnic cleansing and extensive displacement. Inadequate governance frameworks and economic volatility rendered the newly established nations incapable of recovering from these crises, exacerbating regional instability. The persistent social and political fragmentation obstructed regional cooperation, essential for the stability of the Western Balkans.

The European Union (EU) implemented many initiatives to address the urgent need for stabilization in the Western Balkans, aiming to promote peace and facilitate integration (Naumovski, 2019). The Royaumont Process 1995 was an early attempt to foster amicable relations via communication and collaboration among Balkan nations. This project represented a critical initial step in promoting regional unity and reciprocal trust. The 1996 Regional Approach Policy established democratic governance, rule of law, and economic reform as preconditions for collaboration. The Kosovo conflict in 1999 revealed the inadequacy of these efforts, leading to establishing the Stability Pact to tackle economic imbalances and persistent ethnic tensions jeopardizing regional stability.

The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), initiated in 2000, established a systematic framework for Western Balkan nations to seek EU membership, dependent on implementing political, legal, and economic changes. This process underscored regional collaboration, democratic government, and safeguarding human rights, creating a definitive framework for EU integration. The EU's actions prominently emphasized post-conflict reconstruction work in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Kosovo, highlighting its enduring commitment to regional stabilization. Even with advancements, the journey toward complete integration is laden with obstacles as some states grapple with the comprehensive implementation of reforms.

A significant difficulty confronting the EU is unresolved territorial disputes and ethnic tensions (Naumovski, 2019). The repercussions of the Yugoslav conflicts persistently influence regional politics, with ethnic nationalism serving a pivotal function in internal administration. The power-sharing system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, instituted by the Dayton Accords, is pre-

carious and vulnerable to ethnic divides. Conversely, Kosovo's status is a complex matter, with persistent tensions between the Albanian majority and the Serbian minority presenting ongoing challenges. The EU has served as a mediator in these conflicts, yet advancements have been sluggish, highlighting the intricacy of the region's political environment.

Economic uncertainty continues to be a significant impediment to the EU's initiatives. The Western Balkans, continuing to recuperate from the conflicts of the 1990s, experienced elevated unemployment rates, especially among the youth. This economic stagnation has incited societal dissatisfaction and facilitated the emergence of populist and nationalist movements that frequently oppose EU-driven reforms. The EU has offered significant financial support for economic development and infrastructure initiatives (European Commission, 2024; EIB, 2024). The efficacy of these programs is significantly contingent upon the Western Balkan government's capacity to implement substantial reforms, such as mitigating corruption, refining tax systems, and augmenting the business climate.

The participation of other countries, notably Russia and China, exacerbates the EU's endeavors to integrate the Western Balkans. Using its historical connections to Serbia, Russia has attempted to diminish EU influence by fostering nationalist sentiments and providing political backing to governments reluctant to pursue EU membership (Bechev, 2023; Zweers and Drost, 2023; McBride, 2023). Concurrently, China has carefully allocated resources to infrastructure projects under its BRI, broadening its regional economic influence. External forces impede the EU's initiatives to foster democratic governance and uphold the rule of law, yet the EU remains resolute in combating these challenges by strengthening its reform agenda.

The geographic position of the Western Balkans along vital commerce and energy corridors reinforces the EU's strategic interest in stabilizing the area. The Balkans are a crucial conduit for transporting products and energy resources among Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Maintaining the region's stability is critical in preserving efficient trade routes and securing energy supplies, mainly as Europe aims to diversify its energy sources and diminish its reliance on Russian gas. The EU has endorsed many infrastructure initiatives in the Balkans, encompassing the construction of pipelines and transport corridors to enhance connectivity and promote trade between the region and the rest of Europe.

The EU is driven by security and migration concerns alongside its economic and strategic goals. The Western Balkans have historically been a nexus for organized crime, encompassing drug trafficking, people smuggling, and arms selling, all of which provide security risks to EU member states (Anastasijevic, 2023, p. 13–14; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022). Furthermore, the 2015 refugee crisis revealed the weaknesses of the Western Balkans as a migration corridor, with thousands of refugees traversing the region into Western Europe (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2022). In response to these challenges, the EU has fortified border controls and improved collaboration with Western Balkan nations, underscoring the significance of regional security within the larger European framework (Anastasijevic, 2023, p. 13–14).

The European Union has made significant strides in fostering stability and integration within the Western Balkans; however, several challenges remain unresolved. The region continues to grapple with the consequences of ethnic conflict, economic stagnation, and external interference, which obstruct its path toward EU membership. The European Union advocates for the establishment of democratic governance, financial reform, and regional cooperation. The future of the Western Balkans and its integration into the broader European framework will markedly depend on the EU's ability to address these complex challenges and to promote lasting peace and stability.

This study examines the European Union's evolving policy framework regarding the Western Balkans, focusing on how the EU has adapted its strategy in response to foreign geopolitical pressures and internal regional challenges. Hypothesizing that the primary obstacles to EU integration in the Balkans stem more from internal governance issues—such as corruption, institutional weakness, and ethnic conflicts—than from external influences, this research seeks to evaluate the EU's strategic adjustments. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the EU shifted from a passive observer to an active participant, implementing initiatives like the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) to foster political, economic, and judicial reforms. However, this integration policy has been continually tested by the growing influence of external actors, particularly Russia and China, whose strategic and financial interests often conflict with the EU's objectives. Using a historical methodology, this study will analyze the evolution of the EU's policy adjustments through key phases—beginning with post-Yugoslav state-building efforts, the launch of SAP, and subsequent policy adaptations. Each phase illustrates the complex interplay of internal governance challenges and external pressures, shaping the EU's long-term vision and policy implementation in the Western Balkans.

1. Balkan Crises and the EU's Involvement

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR) in December 1991, the European Community (EC), now the EU, embarked on enhanced integration as Soviet influence in Eastern Europe diminished. However, the Balkans, no longer under the stabilizing influence of the USSR, experienced a significant surge in ethnic conflicts. The breakup of Yugoslavia led to declarations of independence from several countries, triggering violent confrontations and brutal massacres, especially in Bosnia and Croatia.

Despite its absence of a cohesive foreign policy, the EU's first reaction to these crises was a learning process that demonstrated its adaptability and growth. Despite seeking assistance from the United States (US), internal political issues resulted in non-involvement during the initial stages. As a result, the EU was compelled to operate autonomously, signifying one of its initial substantial ventures into foreign affairs. The Balkan crises of the 1990s challenged the EU's crisis management capacities and revealed the necessity for a more unified strategy for external conflict resolution.

2. The EU's Strategic Shift and Integration Efforts

By the early 2000s, the EU had assimilated lessons from its first difficulties and adopted a more extensive approach to incorporating the Western Balkan nations into the European framework. This policy was founded on the Copenhagen Criteria and ideas from the Maastricht Treaty, which mandated that prospective EU members must internally address ethnic, religious, and sectarian conflicts before accessing the Union. In its dedication to fostering stability, the EU established these rules to prevent unresolved conflicts from jeopardizing greater European security.

Although Croatia and Slovenia have successfully joined the EU, several other Western Balkan nations, including Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, strive to fulfill the stringent admission criteria. The EU has provided substantial financial and technical aid to assist these nations in reforming their political and economic institutions, promoting stability and integration.

3. Ethnic Tensions and the Collapse of Yugoslavia

Source: Birsence, https://www.birsence.com/bir-zamanlar-yugoslavya-vardi-referanduma-gitti-sonra-ne-oldu-biliyor-musun/ (Access Date: 10.04.2023)

Following Josip Broz Tito's death, ethnic nationalism, declining economic conditions, and political instability contributed to the breakup of Yugoslavia. By the early 1990s, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia had all declared their independence, sparking widespread violence, best exemplified by the Bosnian War. This conflict prompted substantial international engagement from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (NATO, 2024; The Collector, 2022).

Initially, the EU sought to preserve Yugoslavia's territorial integrity out of a desire for regional stability. However, Germany's unilateral acknowledgment of Croatia and Slovenia's indepen-

dence in 1991 compelled the EC to amend its policies (Crawford, 1996, pp. 482–521; Wagener, 2016). This transition highlighted the EU's disjointed foreign policy strategy at that time. It underscored its dependence on external entities such as the United States and the United Nations for conflict settlement.

By 2003, Yugoslavia had disintegrated into seven entities, prompting the EU to formulate policies to stabilize these newly sovereign republics. Initiatives like the EC Troika, the Hague Process, and the Badinter Commission were initial efforts to resolve conflicts and provide legal frameworks for recognizing new states. The EU's growing engagement in post-conflict diplomacy signifies a transition to a more proactive role in the region.

The EU's involvement in the Balkan crises, notably the Kosovo War, exposed its foreign policy shortcomings while also catalyzing improvements. NATO and UN initiatives underscored the imperative for a cohesive EU response to regional crises. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the EU emphasized regional stability, democratic governance, and economic advancement in its relations with Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

The Western Balkans remain strategic for the EU as a vital commerce, energy, and migratory route. The region's security ensures safe EU borders and promotes seamless trade across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Moreover, the EU's overarching objective of diversifying its energy supplies, significantly diminishing reliance on Russian gas, renders the Balkans essential to European energy security. The EU has invested in infrastructure projects, including pipelines and transport corridors, to enhance connectivity between the Western Balkans and the rest of Europe.

4. The War in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the EU's Position

The War in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which occurred between 1992 and 1995, is one of the most intricate and tragic conflicts in post-Cold War Europe. The dissolution of Yugoslavia precipitated violent ethnic wars fueled by enduring religious and cultural divisions, exacerbated by the political vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. EC, which subsequently evolved into the EU, endeavored to address the dispute but was initially ineffective, signifying a crucial phase in the EU's formulation of its foreign policy (Jopp, 1994; CVCE, 2024).

In January 1992, the EC acknowledged the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, subsequently recognizing Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence in April following a referendum. Nevertheless, the Bosnian Serbs, influenced by Serbia, abstained from the vote and aimed to retain Bosnia within the Yugoslav Federation. Under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia repudiated Bosnia's independence, precipitating a swift escalation of armed conflict. Shortly after that, the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army (JNA) besieged Sarajevo, a city characterized by its ethnic variety, which includes substantial populations of Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs (Jopp, 1994). The blockade, enduring for almost four years, emerged as a poignant emblem of the war's savagery, alongside tragedies such as the Srebrenica atrocity.

The European Commission, devoid of a cohesive foreign strategy, encountered difficulties in responding decisively. Preliminary measures, including economic penalties and diplomatic coercion against Serbia, were ineffective in curbing the bloodshed. The international community, comprising the UN and EU, enacted financial sanctions against Serbia to compel Milošević's dictatorship to terminate hostilities; nevertheless, these measures were inadequate. Ethnic cleansing, primarily directed at Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks), intensified, and the EU's failure to address the problem attracted considerable condemnation. Academics have observed that this failure extended the conflict and revealed significant deficiencies in the EU's foreign policy framework.

By mid-1992, it was evident that the EU alone could not address the issue (Jopp, 1994). The conflict had evolved into one of Europe's most grave humanitarian crises since World War II, resulting in over 100,000 fatalities and millions of individuals displaced by 1995. The ethnic intricacies of the struggle, with Bosniaks advocating for a unitary Bosnia, Serbs desiring alignment with Serbia, and Croats aiming for territorial acquisitions, rendered peace unattainable. As the EU's initiatives faltered, the U.S. ultimately became involved in the crisis, having previously hesitated to intervene in what it saw as a European matter.

In 1995, the U.S. assumed a prominent role, collaborating with NATO to execute airstrikes against Serbian forces (NATO, 2024). The military operations, coupled with heightened diplomatic initiatives, resulted in a truce and, ultimately, the ratification of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995. The Dayton Agreement, facilitated by the U.S. and the EU, concluded the conflict but established a convoluted political framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina, partitioning the nation into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. The deal effectively terminated the conflict, but its entrenchment of ethnic lines has faced criticism for perpetuating Bosnia's political instability.

The EU significantly contributed to the post-conflict reconstruction of Bosnia (Jopp, 1994). The U.S. spearheaded the peace discussions, while the EU played a crucial role in reconstruction operations, providing significant financial resources to rehabilitate war-affected regions. The EU's engagement encompassed the creation of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) and, subsequently, the EUFOR Althea mission, which replaced NATO's stabilization force in 2004 to guarantee enduring peace in the region (European External Action Service, 2020). These initiatives were integral to a comprehensive EU policy to stabilize the Western Balkans while Bosnia and other Balkan nations pursued enhanced union with Europe.

The Bosnian War revealed substantial deficiencies in the EU's foreign policy and crisis management capacities. The failure to avert or control the conflict underscored the constraints of the EU's collective action, leading to more resilient foreign policy frameworks in later years. The establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the role of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy were direct responses to these shortcomings. The progression of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), which subsequently transformed into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), exemplified the EU's acknowledgment of the necessity for autonomous security and defense capabilities (Kaya, 2024, pp. 227-28).

Moreover, the crisis highlighted the significance of cooperation between the EU and global entities, especially the U.S. and NATO. The collaboration among these bodies in tackling security crises established a paradigm for subsequent EU-led peacekeeping and conflict resolution initiatives. The Bosnian War was a crucial learning opportunity for the EU, influencing its strategy towards external crises and formulating a more unified and assertive foreign policy in subsequent years.

5. The Kosovo War and the EU

Kosovo, an autonomous region of Yugoslavia since 1974, faced a hazardous condition after the collapse of Yugoslavia. Following Serbia's withdrawal of autonomy in 1989, the Kosovo Albanian populace, which had previously sought autonomy during Tito's administration, escalated their pursuit of independence. Notwithstanding the absence of international recognition, their perseverance and reluctance to acknowledge Serbian authority in Kosovo exemplify their determination (Kut, 1998, p. 58).

Tensions escalated further, culminating in the formation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in 1995, indicating a transition to armed resistance. The KLA's assaults on Serbian soldiers in early 1998 compelled Slobodan Milošević to initiate a campaign of ethnic cleansing akin to the Bosnian conflict (Hosmer, 2001). Learning from Bosnia, the international community acted promptly and firmly to avert a comparable humanitarian catastrophe, reaffirming its dedication to global humanitarian initiatives.

In September 1998, the UN adopted Security Council Resolution 1199, demanding an immediate cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of Serbian troops, and the secure repatriation of refugees. This resolution also commenced a process for negotiating Kosovo's political status. The negotiation process encompassed various players, including delegates from Kosovo and Serbia and foreign mediators. Since NATO was crucial in enforcing adherence to the conditions, the resolution's support marked a significant event. Despite Serbia receiving a compliance deadline, tensions persisted, prompting NATO to intervene militarily in March 1999 without formal sanction from the UN Security Council (Haalder & O'Hanlon, 1999, p. 82).

NATO's action was crucial for two principal reasons. First, it marked NATO's inaugural use of force against a sovereign nation for human rights infractions occurring within its territory, a decision of considerable significance. Second, it signified NATO's dedication to rectifying its tardy reaction in Bosnia, illustrating a novel post-Soviet international framework. NATO's action in Kosovo established a precedent for subsequent humanitarian interventions, describing the constraints and possibilities of international institutions in conflict resolution.

During the Kosovo War, the EU faced significant challenges in providing an effective intervention, primarily due to internal political divisions and conflicting national interests. The EU could not deploy a unified military force, limiting its involvement to supporting NATO-led interventions. This inability to act independently underscored the EU's limitations in foreign policy,

revealing a lack of cohesive military capability and projecting an image of weakness on the international stage. Furthermore, the EU struggled to adopt a consistent stance on human rights violations in Kosovo, which diminished the trust of the Kosovar people in European institutions. The differing approaches of leading EU nations, such as Germany and France, to the conflict highlighted the internal challenges the Union faced in its policy-making processes. Despite these shortcomings, the EU's substantial role in Kosovo's post-war reconstruction and its commitment to promoting long-term stability and development in the Balkans were significant contributions that demonstrated the Union's dedication to the region.

Although the EU's impact on the Kosovo War remains controversial, the conflict enhanced its foreign policy capacity. The Kosovo War underscored the importance of coordinated foreign and security policies for the EU, subsequently becoming a cornerstone for establishing the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Additionally, this war highlighted the EU's need to bolster its military capabilities, fostering closer collaboration with NATO to compensate for its limitations. In the post-war period, the EU provided financial assistance to Kosovo to promote political stability and economic growth in the Balkans. This support included EU-driven reform initiatives that specifically targeted the reduction of ethnic tensions, a crucial step in accelerating the region's integration with Europe. While constraints and limited influence marked the EU's role during the Kosovo War, its efforts in post-conflict peacebuilding were instrumental, reflecting a turning point in the EU's approach to enhancing its security policies and stabilizing the region.

6. The Republic of North Macedonia

North Macedonia declared independence in 1991, adopting a new constitution that same year (Zhuzhelovska & Bayraktar Durgun, 2023). However, the constitution provided limited rights to the Albanian minority, leading to significant tensions between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. The Albanian community, now classified as a minority, demanded recognition as a "Founding Nation." Their significant demands included establishing an Albanian university, eliminating ethnic discrimination in state institutions, official use of the Albanian language, equal opportunities in public sector employment, and the unrestricted use of the Albanian flag and other national symbols (Üçyıldız, 2006, p. 26).

The Macedonian Government's rejection of these demands was a significant turning point, escalating tensions. In 1995, the Albanians unilaterally opened an Albanian university, which the Macedonian government deemed illegal (Doder, 1995). This refusal to meet their demands led to the National Liberation Army (NLA), an armed group seeking greater rights for the Albanian minority (Rosulek, 2001). The conflict threatened to destabilize the region, prompting the Macedonian Government to request international assistance.

In August 2001, under significant pressure from the U.S. and the EU, the Macedonian and Albanian factions in power met in Ohrid and ratified a peace accord known as the Ohrid Framework Agreement (Ebrary.net, 2001). This accord brought about constitutional reforms, including greater recognition of the Albanian minority's rights, language use, and participation in public

institutions (Üçyıldız, 2006, p. 27). The Ohrid Agreement was a turning point, marking a significant effort to stabilize ethnic relations in North Macedonia and ensure a more inclusive governance system, demonstrating the profound influence of global actors in local conflicts.

Following North Macedonia's independence in 1991, the European Union engaged with it cautiously but strategically. Initially, the EU hesitated to provide substantial support, focusing instead on broader regional stability amid the turmoil following Yugoslavia's dissolution. However, as ethnic tensions between Macedonians and Albanians escalated, the EU recognized the need to be more active to prevent conflict spillovers. In the late 1990s, the EU shifted towards direct intervention to mediate ethnic disputes and promote political inclusivity. This shift became especially pronounced with the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, where the EU, alongside the U.S., acted as a critical facilitator in negotiations (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2001; Ebrary.net, 2001). Despite criticism regarding its slow response, the EU's involvement was instrumental in reducing immediate tensions and supporting constitutional reforms that granted greater rights to the Albanian minority. During this period, the EU's diplomatic pressure highlighted its commitment to preventing regional instability and fostering a model of multi-ethnic coexistence.

In the post-Ohrid period, the EU maintained its commitment to North Macedonia by embedding European integration as a long-term goal. The promise of EU membership was a powerful incentive for North Macedonia to continue political and economic reforms, including adherence to democratic standards and the protection of minority rights. However, the EU's stance was often criticized for focusing more on structural reforms than addressing the underlying socio-economic grievances that fueled ethnic tensions. Additionally, delays in the EU accession process, partly due to unresolved naming disputes and internal EU disagreements, led to frustration among North Macedonian citizens and political elites. Despite these setbacks, the EU consistently emphasized the importance of stability and cohesion in North Macedonia, using financial aid, monitoring mechanisms, and diplomatic support to encourage compliance with European norms. Thus, while internal challenges occasionally limited the EU's influence, its overall impact on North Macedonia's post-independence trajectory remained substantial, particularly in promoting institutional resilience and regional peace.

7. EU's Interest Perceptions in the Balkans

The Balkans hold a critical geostrategic position that has, for centuries, influenced the region's relationship with Europe. Located at the crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Mediterranean, the Balkans are a crucial link controlling access to the Aegean, Black Sea, and Mediterranean regions. This has positioned the Balkans as a strategic transit hub for trade, transportation, and migration routes. Historically, this geostrategic importance has drawn the interest of multiple European powers, and in the modern era, it continues to be a focal point of the EU's foreign policy. The EU's engagement in the Balkans is shaped by various interests, ranging from security concerns to economic opportunities, which are intricately tied to the region's stability.

One of the EU's foremost interests in the Balkans is ensuring the security of its immediate borders, as instability in the region has the potential to spread beyond the Balkans and affect the wider European continent. The security concerns stemming from the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent conflicts that erupted in the 1990s have heightened the EU's focus on regional stability. The fragmentation of Yugoslavia and the associated ethnic and territorial conflicts posed a significant threat not only to the Balkan states but also to the broader European security framework. For instance, Hungary, a member of the EU during the 2004 enlargement, had historically been satisfied with Yugoslavia's federal structure, particularly concerning protecting the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina. However, the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 1990s disrupted this stability, leading to increased concerns about the security of ethnic Hungarians in the region (Üçyıldız, 2006, p. 27).

Another critical dimension of the EU's interest in the Balkans pertains to the potential exploitation of the region by international terrorist organizations. The EU is actively working to prevent the Balkans from becoming a haven for terrorism and organized crime. It perceives some Balkan states' porous borders and institutional weaknesses as vulnerabilities that transnational criminal networks and terrorist groups could exploit (Europol, 2021, p. 19). The region's geographic position as a gateway between Europe and the Middle East makes it an ideal transit route for illicit activities, including the trafficking of weapons, drugs, and people (Europol, 2021, p. 51). In response, the EU has implemented various security measures and supported strengthening local governance and law enforcement in the Balkans (Europol, 2021, p. 19, 51). These initiatives aim to ensure the region's security and prevent it from being exploited by criminal elements, which could have far-reaching consequences for European security.

In addition to the security challenges posed by terrorism and organized crime, the EU is deeply concerned about the trafficking of drugs, arms, and humans across the Balkans. The region's instability and weak governance structures in some countries have created fertile ground for these illicit activities to flourish. The EU has actively assisted Balkan governments in combating these problems by providing financial and technical support for border security and anti-trafficking efforts. Furthermore, the EU has been closely monitoring the situation to prevent further destabilization, which could result in an influx of refugees and asylum seekers into EU member states. The migration crises of recent years have underscored the importance of maintaining stability in the Balkans to avoid large-scale population displacement and the resulting socio-political pressures on EU countries (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021).

Economic interests also play a significant role in shaping the EU's approach to the Balkans. The region is a crucial trade transit point representing a growing European goods and services market. The EU is keen to ensure that the Balkans remain economically stable, as instability in the region could disrupt trade routes and negatively impact the economies of the Balkan states and the EU. Moreover, the Balkans offer the EU an opportunity to expand its internal market by integrating the region into the European single market. Achieving economic stability and fostering closer economic ties with the Balkans is a crucial priority for the EU, as it would benefit both

sides, promoting growth and development across the region while enhancing the EU's influence and competitiveness on the global stage.

The EU's broader strategic objective in the Balkans is to address the region's historical challenges and failures. The conflicts of the 1990s exposed the EU's weaknesses in crisis management and foreign policy coordination, prompting a reassessment of its approach to the Balkans. As a result, the EU has sought to promote political and economic reforms in the Balkan states, with the long-term goal of integrating them into the European Union. SAP has been central to this effort, providing a framework for the gradual integration of the Balkan countries into the EU, contingent on adopting democratic norms, market-based economies, and respect for human rights.

Ultimately, the EU's interest in the Balkans is driven by the recognition that instability in the region poses a significant risk to the security, economic prosperity, and political cohesion of Europe as a whole (Ağca, 2010: 7). The EU is deeply committed to promoting stability and fostering integration in the Balkans, aiming to mitigate these risks and ensure that the Balkans become a stable, prosperous, and fully integrated part of the European family. The ongoing challenges in the region, from security threats to economic fragility, underscore the importance of sustained EU engagement and support for the Balkan states as they navigate the path towards EU membership and more excellent regional stability.

8. The EU's Political Initiatives

The EU's initiatives in the Balkans, from the Royaumont Process to the Stability Pact and SAP, are of significant strategic importance. These policies represent the EU's concerted effort to establish long-term stability in a region historically plagued by conflict. They also signify the EU's commitment to integrating the Balkan nations into the European framework, addressing political, security, and economic challenges.

The Royaumont Process was the EU's first major initiative for the Balkans, launched in December 1995 upon France's proposal. Officially named the Good Neighborliness and Stability Process, its goal was to promote regional cooperation, peace, and stability by fostering good neighborly relations and cross-border cooperation. The Royaumont Process brought together civil society organizations from Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, and neighboring states, as well as prominent international actors such as the U.S., Russia, and the European Commission. Although it did not lead to immediate concrete outcomes, the Royaumont Process laid the groundwork for future regional integration and cooperation (Turan & Akçay, 2019). Its most significant contribution was the creation of an infrastructure for subsequent initiatives, such as the Stability Pact, which would emerge a few years later (Çeviköz, 1997, p. 146).

Following the Royaumont Process, the Regional Approach Policy was introduced in 1996 as part of a broader effort to ensure the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement and integrate the Western Balkans. The policy focused on enhancing bilateral relations between the

EU and Balkan states by promoting democracy, the rule of law, and economic reform. One of the policy's key goals was to foster the development of democratic institutions and encourage economic restructuring to meet EU standards. This approach marked a reorganization of EU strategy in the region, adapting to the shifting political landscape of the Balkans and laying the groundwork for further integration efforts (Alia, 2022).

The Stability Pact for Southeast Europe launched in 1999 in response to the Kosovo Crisis, represented a significant evolution in the EU's approach to the region. This initiative aimed not just to react to crises but to address their root causes by promoting security, democratic governance, and economic cooperation. The Stability Pact involved various international actors, including EU member states, G-8 countries, NATO, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the UN, and financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. It sought to prevent future conflicts by focusing on post-crisis reconstruction and fostering regional cooperation. The Stability Pact distinguished itself from previous initiatives by its comprehensive scope, aiming to establish a free trade zone in the Balkans and improve economic relations with the EU. It prioritized minority rights, civil society development, regional cooperation, and financial transparency, among other goals (Crinica, 2007, p. 67).

The SAP, introduced in 1999, represented a more structured and standardized approach to EU-Balkan relations. The SAP aimed to provide Balkan countries with a clear path toward EU membership, contingent upon meeting specific political, economic, and legal criteria. The process involved setting benchmarks for political association, financial integration, and creating a common market through trade agreements and customs harmonization. The SAP also sought to standardize the legal frameworks of Balkan countries with EU standards, creating a foundation for eventual EU membership (Begaj, 2008: 48).

A two-stage process characterizes the SAP. The first stage involves determining whether a country meets the prerequisites for the Agreement, including political stability, respect for human rights, and democratic governance. The second stage, signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), formalizes the country's political and economic relationship with the EU. This phase is crucial for creating the conditions necessary for integration into the EU's single market and broader institutional framework. The SAP remains a cornerstone of the EU's policy in the Western Balkans, providing both a roadmap for reform and a mechanism for integration into the EU (Crinica, 2007, p. 68).

In conclusion, the EU's political initiatives in the Balkans have evolved significantly since the 1990s, reflecting the region's changing dynamics and the EU's growing role as a stabilizing force. From the Royaumont Process to the Stability Pact and the SAP, these initiatives have sought to address the root causes of instability and promote long-term peace, security, and integration. While challenges remain, particularly in fully realizing these initiatives' goals, the EU's sustained engagement in the Balkans underscores its commitment to fostering a stable and prosperous European neighborhood.

9. Western Balkan Countries in the Stabilization and Association Process

Serbia

Serbia's relationship with the European Union began informally in the mid-1990s but gained formal momentum with the membership perspective offered to the Western Balkan countries at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003. This summit was a significant event in the EU's enlargement policy, where the EU made a clear commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans, providing a roadmap for their future integration (Tout L'Europe, 2013). As the largest successor state to Yugoslavia, Serbia's relations with the EU have been central to its foreign policy and its pursuit of European integration, similar to other Balkan nations. However, Serbia's path has been complicated by regional tensions, notably its role in the Yugoslav Wars and relations with Kosovo.

At the Thessaloniki Summit, Serbia was recognized as a potential candidate country after committing to cooperate with the EU on war crimes, a commitment that was reiterated in a subsequent meeting after the summit (European Commission, 2003). Nonetheless, negotiations were paused in 2006 due to Serbia's failure to fully comply with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Talks resumed in 2007 when Serbia recommitted to collaborating on issues surrounding war crimes. By 2011, the European Commission endorsed Serbia's candidate status, and on March 1, 2012, Serbia officially became a candidate country, marking a significant milestone in its EU aspirations.

A critical moment in Serbia's EU accession process came on April 19, 2013, with the signing of the Brussels Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo. The EU facilitated this agreement to normalize relations between the two parties, which had been at an impasse due to ethnic and political tensions. The Brussels Agreement was a significant step forward, a beacon of hope in Serbia's EU membership ambitions, although issues surrounding Kosovo's recognition continue to pose challenges. Serbia's accession negotiations formally commenced in 2014. However, the European Commission announced in 2018 that full accession would not likely occur before 2025, citing both political reforms and the unresolved status of Kosovo as crucial obstacles.

On July 6, 2022, the European Parliament expressed concerns over Serbia's lack of progress on key reforms related to the rule of law, media freedom, and the normalization of relations with Kosovo. These concerns highlight Serbia's specific challenges in its EU accession process. While Serbia remains engaged in the EU accession process, progress has been slow, and significant hurdles remain.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia's journey toward EU integration began in 1996 with its participation in the Phare Programme (European Commission, 2000). In 2001, it became the first Western Balkan country to sign a SAA, a significant step toward EU membership. The government applied for

EU membership in 2004 and was officially recognized as a candidate country by the European Council in 2005, marking significant progress in its EU integration journey (European Commission, 2020).

However, North Macedonia's progress was hindered by longstanding disputes, particularly with Greece over the country's name. Despite significant political reforms, including measures taken in 2009 to strengthen the judiciary, police, and public administration, Greece's veto delayed the start of accession negotiations. This issue was resolved in 2019 when North Macedonia officially changed its name, paving the way for further progress. Nevertheless, Bulgaria's subsequent veto over historical and linguistic disputes has presented new challenges.

The European Council approved the commencement of accession negotiations with North Macedonia in March 2020. The opening stage of the talks formally began in July 2022, following the adoption of the Negotiating Framework (European Commission, 2020).

Albania

Albania's accession journey began with the SAP in 2003. After three years of negotiations, the SAA was signed in 2006 in Luxembourg. It comprises 135 articles, five annexes, and six protocols (Begaj, 2008: 48). The agreement is built on four pillars: political dialogue, progressive trade liberalization, public freedoms, and legal cooperation (European Commission, 2020).

Albania was granted candidate status in 2014, recognizing its progress in implementing reforms. However, concerns regarding judicial reforms, corruption, and organized crime delayed the opening of accession negotiations. In March 2020, the European Council agreed to begin accession negotiations, and by July 2022, formal talks commenced under the revised enlargement methodology, marking a critical step in Albania's EU integration process.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU accession process has been more complex due to the country's post-conflict recovery and ongoing political and institutional reform challenges. As part of the SAP, the EU's roadmap for Bosnia outlined vital obligations, including promoting democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Although negotiations began in 2005, they were suspended in 2008 due to Bosnia's failure to meet EU demands on police reform (Mazrek, 2022).

The SAA was signed in 2008 and came into force in 2015. Following years of constitutional reforms and commitment to the Dayton Peace Agreement, Bosnia submitted its application for EU membership in 2016. However, the European Commission's 2019 Opinion highlighted significant shortcomings, outlining 14 key priorities Bosnia must address, including tackling corruption, judicial reforms, and improving human rights protections (Council of Europe, 2022).

On October 12, 2022, the European Commission recommended that Bosnia be granted candidate status, provided it fulfills these critical requirements (European Parliamentary Research Service, (2021). The European Council formally granted Bosnia candidate status in December 2022.

Croatia

Croatia's EU accession process was the most successful among the Western Balkan countries. It signed the SAA in 2001, marking the beginning of its formal relationship with the EU. Croatia applied for EU membership in 2003 and was granted candidate status in 2004. Croatia received substantial pre-accession financial assistance to support its accession efforts, totaling €138.5 million in 2007 and €146 million in 2008 (European Commission, 2012).

Despite facing challenges, including border disputes with Slovenia, Croatia successfully implemented the required reforms, particularly in judicial cooperation, anti-corruption efforts, and collaboration with the ICTY. After resolving these issues, Croatia signed its Accession Treaty in 2011 and officially joined the EU on July 1, 2013, becoming the EU's 28th member state (European Commission, 2013).

10. The European Union's Western Balkans Policy

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU has maintained a steadfast commitment to stabilizing the Western Balkans, recognizing the region's strategic importance to European security. The EU's involvement during the Bosnian War tested its foreign policy capabilities, revealing the challenges and opportunities in dealing with regional instability. Despite initial struggles, including reliance on allies like the United States, NATO, and the United Nations, the EU gradually adopted a more proactive role to ensure long-term peace and integration.

The EU's policy framework evolved, introducing initiatives such as the Royaumont Process, the Regional Approach, the Stability Pact, and the SAP. These policies were designed to anchor the Western Balkans within a broader European integration strategy. Central to these initiatives is the EU's conditionality strategy, where the promise of EU membership incentivizes countries to implement crucial reforms in governance, economics, and the judiciary. The success of this strategy is exemplified by Croatia's accession in 2013, which serves as a model for other Balkan countries (European & International Analysts Group, 2013; Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2023).

While Croatia has successfully joined the EU, other Western Balkan nations remain in various stages of the accession process. Serbia, for example, has been a candidate country since 2012, but Kosovo's unresolved status complicates its path toward membership. The Brussels Agreement of 2013 marked a step toward normalization between Serbia and Kosovo, yet tensions remain. Understanding the complexity of their relations requires clarifying that Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence continues to impede its progress toward EU membership.

Kosovo's contested independence has delayed its aspirations for EU membership, as several EU member states do not recognize its sovereignty. This diplomatic obstacle complicates Kosovo's and Serbia's accession processes, as normalizing their relations is a crucial EU requirement for further integration.

North Macedonia has faced a similarly challenging path toward EU membership, marked by external disputes. Greece had long vetoed North Macedonia's accession due to the long-standing controversy over the country's name, which was resolved with the Prespa Agreement in 2018, leading to the country's official name change. However, new obstacles have arisen, notably Bulgaria's veto over historical and linguistic disputes. Although the European Council approved the opening of accession negotiations in 2020, the process remains hindered by these unresolved issues (Barigazzi, 2020; Radio Free Europe, 2022).

Albania, another candidate country, has also made significant strides in aligning itself with EU standards. It was granted candidate status in 2014, and formal negotiations began in 2020. However, Albania continues to face internal challenges related to corruption, organized crime, and judicial reforms (Dobrushi, 2023). Addressing these persistent issues is crucial if Albania is to meet the stringent criteria required for EU membership.

In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina has lagged behind its neighbors in the accession process due to its complex governance system, a legacy of the Dayton Peace Agreement. This governance structure, intended to balance the interests of the country's ethnically divided population, has proven to be a significant barrier to political and economic reforms. Bosnia was granted candidate status in 2022, marking a pivotal moment in its EU relationship. The European Commission outlined 14 key priorities that Bosnia must meet to progress further, focusing on judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and strengthening the rule of law.

Meanwhile, the growing influence of Russia and China in the region poses a significant challenge to the EU's efforts. Historically aligned with Serbia, Russia has utilized its diplomatic and energy ties to maintain a foothold in the Balkans, often supporting nationalist movements and fostering anti-EU sentiment. Serbia remains closely aligned with Moscow, complicating its relations with the EU, especially regarding normalizing ties with Kosovo.

At the same time, China's presence in the region has expanded through its BRI, with investments in infrastructure projects across several Balkan countries (The People's Map of Global China, 2023). These projects are attractive to countries such as Montenegro and North Macedonia, which seek development funds (RFE/RL, 2022; US-China Today, 2020; The People's Map of Global China, 2023). However, they also raise concerns about the potential for economic dependency on China and the long-term consequences of political alignment with the EU.

The EU has recognized these geopolitical dynamics and has taken steps to reinforce its influence. The decision to grant Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status in 2022 demonstrates the EU's strategic interest in ensuring the region remains aligned with European values and institutions. However, delays in the accession process have fostered Euro-skepticism, making it critical for the EU to expedite the integration of these countries to prevent them from drifting toward Russia or China.

Looking ahead, the EU must address several pressing challenges to ensure the successful integration of the Western Balkans. First, it must offer more straightforward and realistic access

timelines, as prolonged uncertainty has weakened public support for EU membership in many Balkan countries. Second, the EU must increase its economic engagement, offering viable alternatives to Chinese and Russian investments by funding infrastructure projects and supporting economic reforms.

Moreover, the EU must emphasize good governance, combat corruption, and promote judicial independence. Organized crime and weak legal frameworks continue to impede progress in several Balkan states, and the EU's conditionality strategy should be reinforced with more stringent mechanisms for monitoring reforms. In parallel, fostering civic engagement is vital to ensuring that democratic values take root and that the accession process is not just a top-down exercise.

Considering the rising geopolitical competition, the EU must treat the Western Balkans not as a peripheral issue but as a central component of its security and economic strategy. The region's integration into the EU is essential for stabilizing Europe's southeastern flank and countering external influences from Russia and China. By accelerating the accession process and increasing its investment in the region, the EU can solidify its role as the primary actor in the Balkans and secure the region's alignment with European norms and values.

Ultimately, the successful integration of the Balkans into the EU is not only a matter of regional stability but also a broader strategic imperative for the EU. Acting swiftly and decisively will ensure the Western Balkans remain on a European trajectory. The coming years will determine whether the EU can maintain its influence and secure the region's place within its fold or whether external powers will succeed in drawing the Balkans away from European integration. This will shape not only the future of the Balkans but the future of Europe as a whole.

Conclusion

The EU's engagement with the Western Balkans reflects the region's profound geopolitical significance, shaped by centuries of conflict and alliances. Historically, the Balkans have been central to Europe's security, acting as a frontier between empires. The EU's SAP provides a framework for regional stability, offering the prospect of membership contingent on implementing key reforms. Croatia's accession in 2013 exemplifies the potential of this process, highlighting the region's importance for EU stability, security, and economic growth. However, other nations like Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia, and Herzegovina face significant challenges on their path to membership, raising questions about the pace and feasibility of their integration.

Despite the Brussels Agreement of 2013, the unresolved Serbia-Kosovo dispute remains a significant obstacle to both nations' EU aspirations, mainly due to the geopolitical implications of Kosovo's partial recognition. This tension impedes diplomatic normalization and critical economic advancement, complicating regional integration. Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina's governance structure—rooted in the Dayton Peace Agreement—limits its ability to undertake necessary reforms, particularly enhancing judicial independence and tackling corruption. While

North Macedonia and Albania have progressed toward meeting EU criteria, persistent governance issues—especially corruption—continue to slow advancement. These challenges emphasize the need for long-term political commitment from the EU and these countries to ensure eventual membership.

In addition to these internal issues, the EU must contend with external influences in the Western Balkans, especially Russia and China. Russia's energy dominance in Serbia and political leverage throughout the region have created dependencies that obstruct the EU's integration strategy. Meanwhile, China's BRI has built critical infrastructure in countries such as Montenegro and North Macedonia, leading to significant financial dependencies. To counter these pressures, the EU must foster local economic growth through infrastructure projects and provide alternative investments to reduce dependencies on non-European actors.

Alongside economic efforts, the EU must intensify diplomatic engagement to resolve political disputes hindering integration. The Serbia-Kosovo conflict remains one of the critical barriers to regional cohesion. The Berlin Process, fostering dialogue among Western Balkan nations, could be more prominent in achieving concrete outcomes, particularly in resolving political disputes and enhancing economic integration. Recent developments, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina's candidacy status in 2022 and Croatia's inclusion in the Schengen Area, reflect the EU's commitment to the region. However, for the Western Balkans to stay on the path to integration, the EU must offer tangible benefits like economic aid packages and set clear timelines for accession. Addressing governance issues, particularly corruption and rule of law deficiencies, is vital for sustainable reforms that benefit citizens.

Turkey's role cannot be overlooked. Turkey is well-positioned to contribute to stability with its historical, cultural, and geopolitical ties to the Balkans, particularly Bosnia, Albania, and Kosovo. As a NATO member and EU candidate, Turkey complements EU efforts by promoting infrastructure development, trade, and cooperation. Its engagement could bridge gaps between the Balkans and the EU in security and migration management. However, diplomatic management must align Turkey's involvement with EU strategic interests. Effectively leveraged, Turkey's engagement supports regional integration while enhancing mutual economic and security benefits.

While the EU has made commendable progress in promoting stability in the Western Balkans, pervasive corruption and weak institutions impede integration. Despite external support, sustainable integration requires more robust domestic reforms within the Balkans. This suggests that while external geopolitical pressures matter, the primary challenge lies in governance dynamics within Balkan states. The EU must prioritize structural reforms and rule-of-law initiatives to empower institutions and enhance accountability.

The EU's relationship with the Western Balkans stands at a critical juncture. Over the next few years, decisions will shape the region's future and Europe's stability, security, and economic prosperity. Integrating the Western Balkans is not just regional but strategic for Europe's resilience against pressures from Russia and China. To consolidate its role as a global actor, the EU must offer

clear timelines, substantial incentives, and a diplomatic framework addressing regional challenges. Failure to act decisively could leave the area vulnerable to external influence, undermining the EU's vision of a united Europe. Fully embracing Western Balkans integration will secure Europe's south-eastern frontier and reinforce global leadership for stability in an uncertain world.

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