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AN EVIDENCE-BASED ANALYSIS OF THE EU'S HAMPERED TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract: *The objectives of this paper were to assess the role of the EU in the countries willing to join and committed to the negotiation processes (with a particular focus on the WB region) and to explore further and explain the dynamics of the EU's crucial role onto the political performance, summarizing internal and external country and region-based developments. For this purpose, the deployed methodology consists of conducting a comparative quantitative analysis, comparing evidence from selected countries and from selected enlargement waves. The main results of the analysis confirmed that the EU's role in ensuring democratic performances at the country/region level is seriously weakened over time and that it is therefore essential that the EU, especially in uncertain times, rethink and revitalize its democracy-promoting mechanisms to rebuild and re-test itself as a transformative power.*

Keywords: *EU Integration; Democratic Performance; Enlargement Waves; Western Balkans; Transformative Power*

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) has evolved from its early origins as an economic community into a club of democracies and a promoter of democratic values. While the EU's primary purpose was initially economic integration, the concept of democracy and the rule of law gradually became integral to its identity and objectives. Until then, democracy was not explicitly highlighted even less when signing the Treaty of Rome, but the principles of democracy and the rule of law were seen as underlying values.

Expansion and enlargement enriched the EU's means to promote democracy because as the EU expanded its membership, it became more diverse and encompassed countries with different political systems. This was especially the case with the Mediterranean Enlargement, whereas Spain's membership was seen primarily as a guarantee for consolidating its new democratic (Diaz 2015). Despite this, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the subsequent reunification of Germany, and the third wave of democratization opened the door for Central and Eastern European countries to join the EU.

While the Maastricht Treaty established the EU as a political and economic union, it highlighted for the first time the importance of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. It established the Copenhagen Criteria, which set the conditions for countries wishing to join. Since then, the EU has been important in promoting reforms and consolidating democracies beyond its borders.

Although the EU used the perspective of a future enlargement round in the Western Balkan Countries (WB6) and inspired the Member States, it is now challenged by the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, which refers to the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, norms, and practices (Bermeo 2016, 5). The magnitude of this new phenomenon has enormous implications as it questions not only the EU's capability and role as a "transformative power" (Grabbe 2006, 34) but also its capacity as a "regime maker" (O'Brennan and Gassie 2009, 64) and a "Member State builder" (Keil and Arkan 2016, 17) when taking into consideration its efforts to democratize potential Member States. Existing literature highlights that nowadays, the EU is "failing to deliver democracy to those countries engaged in the process of joining the EU" (Wunsch and Dzihic 2017, 5). While democracy promotion was and remains a vital part of the EU's foreign policy, the EU lacks transformative potential, especially when dealing with "defective democracies with little chance of becoming EU members" (Dimitrova and Pridham 2004, 94).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Considering the above context, this paper has a two-fold objective. The first objective is to assess the role of the EU in promoting democratic values and ensuring democratic performance in the countries willing to join and committed to the negotiation processes, taking into consideration different enlargement waves, but with a particular focus on the WB region. Its second objective is to explore further and explain the dynamics of the EU's crucial role in the country's political performance, summarizing internal and external country and region-based developments and main critics and elaborations.

To accomplish these two objectives, the methodology involves conducting a comparative quantitative analysis that compares evidence from selected countries (cross-country) and specific enlargement waves (cross-enlargement waves). The evidence-based analysis will use secondary data from 3 key sources, gathering long-term and reliable data on the political/democracy performance worldwide, respectively Freedom House, Nations in Transit, and Bertelsmann Transformation Index.

The selected countries/regions and enlargement waves for the analysis are (1) the Mediterranean enlargement (Greece, Spain, and Portugal); (2) recent enlargement waves (Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia); and (3) the enlargement case of the WB region. This is done to analyze the EU's role in promoting democratic values in different times, contexts, and perspectives compared to the WB processes. The countries under the focus of the analysis represent countries that substantially changed their democratic performance due to the EU accession processes (the Mediterranean case) and countries that are primarily similar to the contexts of the WB region countries (Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia).

Background

With the Copenhagen Summit in 1993 and the resulting criteria, the EU not only paved the way to develop a range of policies and instruments to support the promotion of democracy but, furthermore, established monitoring mechanisms to assess the democratic performance of countries wishing to join the EU. Since then, the EU has introduced a list of non-exhaustive tools, varying depending on the context and country in question, demonstrating the diverse range of policies to

promote democratic values within and outside the European Union's borders. This shows once again that the EU has a long history of promoting democratic governance and human rights, although it has not always had the appropriate tools to promote its core values (Pinto 2016). One of the EU's most used approaches to promote democratic reforms is based on conditionality policies, with financial and other assistance to the recipient strongly interlinked to the country's compliance with certain conditions. In this case, conditionality acts as a mechanism to encourage democratic reforms and to set conditions in areas such as the rule of law, human rights, good governance, etc.

On the other hand, enlargement policies and processes are a cornerstone of the EU's comprehensive strategy for promoting and ensuring the democratic character of potential Member States. Democracy promotion in the EU and Europe is vital, as an explicit link exists between EU integration and political performance in terms of democracy (McLaren 2008).

The comparative analysis of the EU's enlargement rounds highlights a difference in approach between the first and subsequent rounds. In the first round of enlargement, the EU did not prioritize the democratization process, as nation-states applying for EU membership were already consolidated democracies. Consequently, there were no preconditions on democracy during the accession negotiation process. Nonetheless, in the 1970s, the EU encountered a new situation with the Mediterranean Enlargement, explicitly with Greece, Spain, and Portugal, since these states had a troubled history concerning their political systems and faced difficulties in transitioning towards consolidating democracies at the national level. In this context, the EU took a different approach and imposed democratic conditions on these countries as a requirement for membership.

This marked the first instance where the EU compelled compliance with democratic conditions. In general, the EU, as an external actor, had to intervene, provide incentives, and influence mechanisms to trigger institutional transformation and democratization processes within these states. Including the conditionality-compliance nexus for democratic reforms represented a significant shift in the EU's membership requirements. It was a turning point for future enlargement waves, indicating that democratic standards would be crucial in the EU's assessment of candidate countries.

This change in approach demonstrated the EU's recognition of the importance of democracy and its commitment to promoting democratic values and institutions among its (potential) Member States. It also highlighted the EU's willingness to actively support and facilitate democratic transitions and consolidation, especially when candidate countries face challenges.

Overall, the EU's experience with Greece, Spain, and Portugal in the 1970s influenced the EU's general requirement framework for full membership, setting a precedent for subsequent enlargement rounds and emphasizing the significance of democratic conditionality in the EU's enlargement process.

Starting from the 1980s, the EU began to refine and expand its conditions for accession, moving beyond formal criteria to include substantive democracy as a critical requirement. This shift demonstrated the EU's aspiration to promote democracy within its region. The EU imposed a rigorous set of conditions on accession, particularly in the case of Central and Eastern European countries (CEEs), which led to the EU becoming deeply involved in the national political transformation processes of candidate states (Pridham 2005).

However, the EU faced challenges in monitoring and regulating the compliance of both existing Member States and the troubled candidate states of the 1970s. This created uncertainties and hesitations regarding the inclusion of further enlargement rounds in the EU's political agenda, which,

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due to the lack of formal mechanisms to ensure compliance and address issues within the EU and among candidate states, undermined the EU's commitment to its enlargement policy (Phinnemore 2006). Despite these challenges, the EU's focus on substantive democracy as a condition for accession demonstrated its determination to promote democratic values and institutions. The EU's involvement in the political transformation of candidate states, particularly in the CEEs, showcased its commitment to supporting democratic transitions and consolidation in the region, which automatically led to an enhanced and reciprocal trust in the EU's transformative power.

Candidate countries often place significant trust in the transformative power of the EU as EU membership offers numerous benefits and opportunities that, despite the political stability, also include various positive "side effects" such as economic development, access to the single market, and increased cooperation with other EU Member States, candidate countries' perception of the EU is that of a catalyst for positive change and progress in their societies. In summary, the EU's transformative power lies in 1) its ability to shape, due to the accession process, the candidate countries' political, legal, and economic systems according to EU standards and norms. This required alignment internally promotes the adoption of democratic principles, human rights, the rule of law, and market-oriented economies; and 2) the provision of candidate countries with technical assistance, financial support, and capacity-building programs to facilitate their adoption of EU standards.

We can highlight that examples such as the democratic transitions of Greece, Spain, and Portugal in the 1970s, as well as the transformations in Central and Eastern European countries in the 2000s, have demonstrated the EU's ability to foster positive changes. Thus, the successful experiences of the previous Member States that have undergone significant societal and political changes through their EU accession process further enhanced the trust in the transformative power of the EU. Nevertheless, a different reality is pictured in the Western Balkan countries, whereas the EU's transformative power is not delivered as expected (Burnell 2000). Although the EU has been engaged in the Western Balkans for nearly two decades, its engagement cannot be considered transformative in terms of an enhanced and sustainable democracy, resulting in consolidated democratic systems. While the EU's engagement has contributed to some progress on democratic reforms in some areas, its capability to democratize the Western Balkan countries remains limited.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CRITIQUE

Existing literature covers several concerns and critics regarding broad and vague definitions of democracy followed by not-fully efficient mechanisms, a general regressive trend of democratic processes resulting in systems of so-called "stabilitocracies", which refers mainly to governments in the Western Balkans that claim to ensure stability, pretend to support EU integration, and rely on informal, clientelist structures, media control, and the production of crises to undermine democracy and the rule of law (Bieber 2018).

Although, among scholars, the EU is considered a "school for democracy" (Renner and Trauner 2009, 457), it is also true that the EU is short of a clear definition and conceptualization of democracy, as it is often criticized that it pursues a "vague and fuzzy" (Kurki 2010, 371) form of "liberal democracy" (Geoffrey 2005) which is then reflected in the difficulties that countries have in fulfilling the EU requirements, and in the assessment methodology of the EU as democracy remains "an aspiration that is not yet defined" (Timmer et al. 2014, 43).

Furthermore, some scholars argue that even the "expected democratic transformation of the region has not become a reality" (Zweers et al. 2022, 11) due to "a closer scrutiny of de-democratization processes and regressive tendencies" (Wunsch and Dzihic 2017, 12).

In addition to the non-linear path to democracy, scholars criticize "that the EU integration context has not been able to effectively counter non-democratic tendencies including outright democratic rollbacks" (Wunsch and Dzihic 2017, 13). As amplified, the EU's "transformative power is not only less effective than expected in the WB6 but is also believed to unintentionally contribute to the consolidation of stabilitocracies" (Zweers et al. 2022, 6). The discussion about the so-called shift from democracy promotion to stability promotion (Wunsch and Dzihic 2017) emphasizes the moderate effect of the EU in the WB6.

Moreover, some countries that have not yet been granted candidate status, such as Kosovo as a counter-example, have made significant strides toward democratic reforms in recent years, suggesting that this status is not necessarily a prerequisite for progress. Considering this, the EU's approach to offering assistance is often criticized as too technical and superficial (Zweers et al. 2022, 13). Also, it is essential to note that the EU's efforts transpose the EU's *acquis de jure* without tackling deep political transformations and without altering the political realities of WB6 (Lemstra 2020, 7).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis provides historical and available data in assessing democratic progress for countries of two previous enlargement rounds and one potential future enlargement wave. Thus, periods under consideration vary given the different timing of the enlargement processes and rounds. Specifically, for the Mediterranean enlargement round, the analyzed period is 1975-1987, as it coincides with a period of democratic transition and engagement towards the EU.

Considering Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, the analyzed period starts from 1990, when the democratic transition and the commitment towards the EU started. Even though the WB region was affected by the democratization boost of the early 90s, the period under analysis starts in 1999-2000 due to the prior political instability in the region caused by the numerous wars and to the fact that the year 2000 points to the beginning of the EU commitment towards this region.

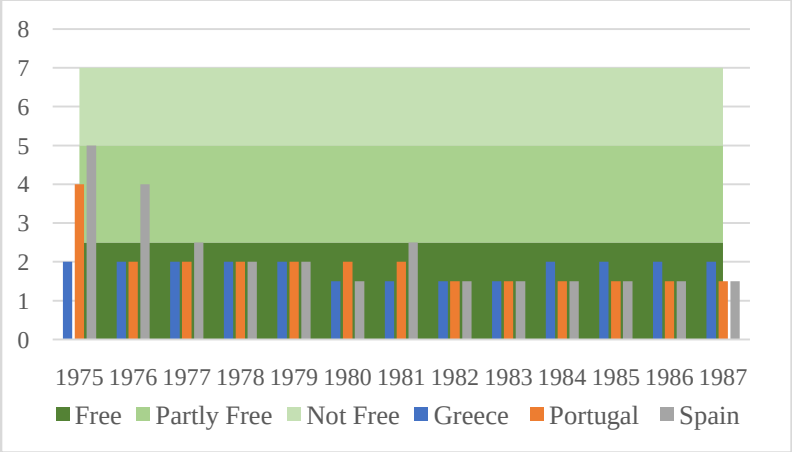


Figure 1: Freedom Status (Greece, Portugal, Spain) (Source: Authors' illustration; Freedom House 2023)

As shown in Figure 1, the countries of the Mediterranean enlargement round transitioned quickly from not being free (the case of Spain) to free in just two years. In the accession process, all three countries considered were already assigned as *free*, according to Freedom House. Since then, the data provided by the Freedom House Index shows no evidence of democratic backsliding for Greece, Spain, and Portugal. The same applies to the countries joining the EU in the recent enlargement rounds: Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia.

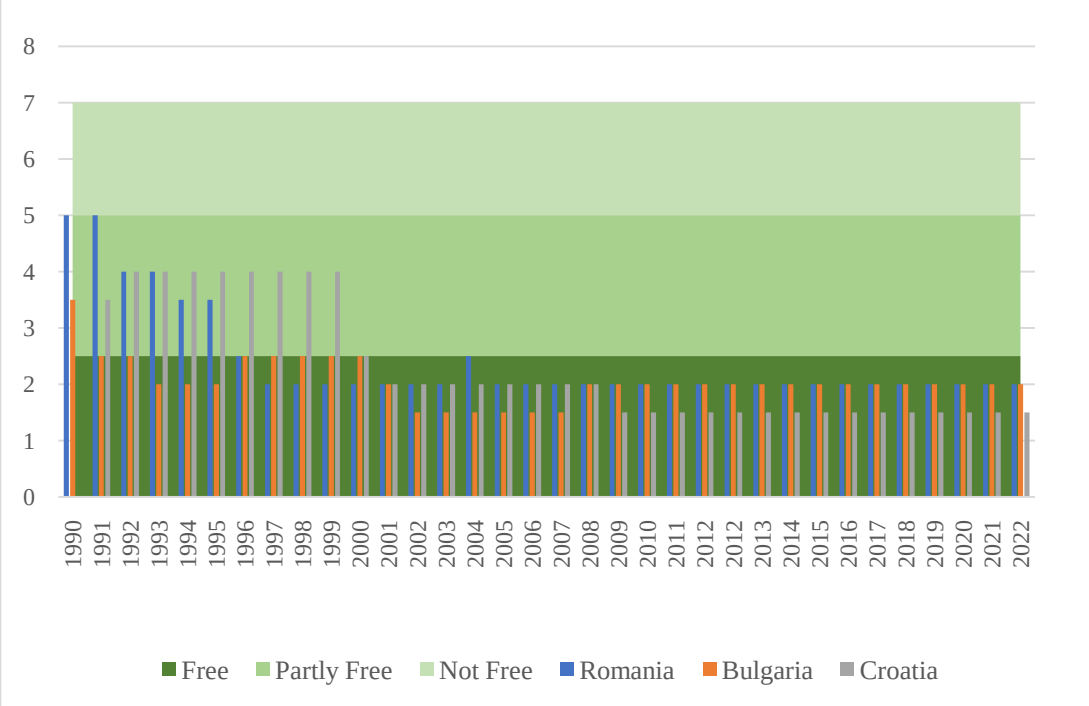


Figure 2: Freedom Status (Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia) (Source: Authors' illustration; Freedom House 2023)

As represented in Figure 2, democratic values were consolidated relatively quickly, considering that Bulgaria has been *free* since 1991, Romania since 1996, and Croatia since 2000. Although Bulgaria has shown some minimal fluctuations in terms of regress, there is no evidence of democratic backsliding, according to the data provided by Freedom House.

On the other side, Figure 3 shows that all Western Balkan countries, taken into consideration, have faced significant challenges in terms of democratic consolidation and strengthening political and civil rights. While all six countries are considered *partly free* according to the latest Freedom House reports, there have been some fluctuations and regressions in democratic progress over time.

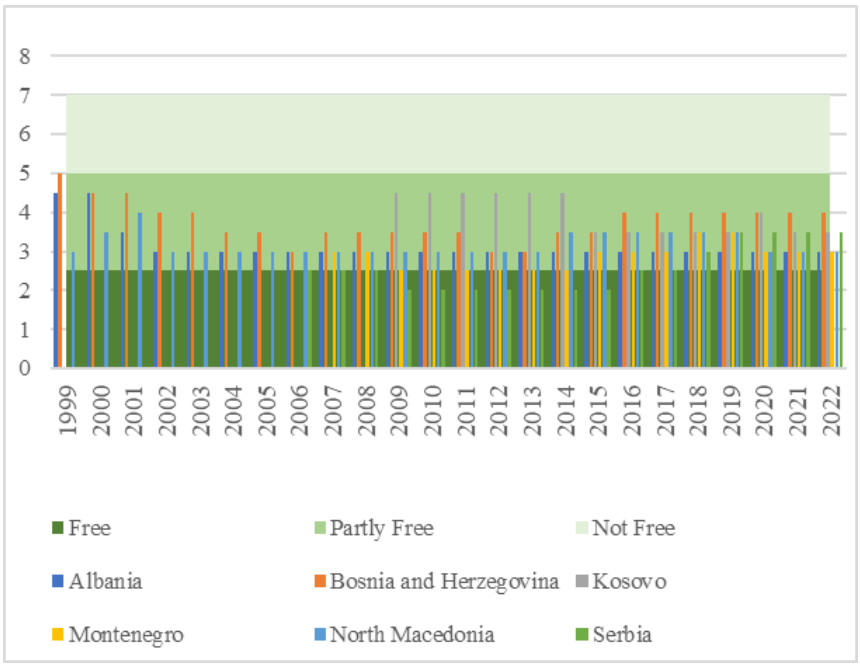


Figure 3: Freedom Status (Western Balkan countries) (Source: Authors' illustration; Freedom House 2023)

Figure 3 shows that Albania has been categorized as *partly free* throughout the whole period, with no significant improvement or decline in its democratic performance since 2002. While Albania has not shown any evidence of democratic backsliding, its democratic performance has stagnated, indicating a lack of progress toward greater political and civil rights. The categorization as *partly free* also applies to Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has had recourse in terms of democratic backsliding since 2008, resulting in a decline in political and civil rights and, as such, being classified as one of the worst-performing countries in the Western Balkans.

Considerable progress was achieved by only two countries of the WB region, namely Montenegro and Serbia. Montenegro was categorized as *free* between 2009 and 2014, indicating improvement in its democratic performance.

On the other hand, evidence shows that Serbia was once considered the best performer in the region, as it presented the best values compared to its neighbors. Serbia is the only country among the WB6 considered *free* for over ten years. However, since 2017, there has been an evolving regress and democratic backsliding, which resulted in being categorized as *partly free*.

Although all Western Balkan countries fall under the same categorization, it must be emphasized that regress in terms of democratic backsliding is most evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia. Despite these country-based insights, the Freedom House Index indicates smaller differences between the WB6 related to political and civil rights compared to some years ago.

Other interesting findings are presented by the evidence provided by Nations in Transit (Figure 4). In contrast, it seems that being a semi-consolidated democracy is sufficient to become an EU Member State.

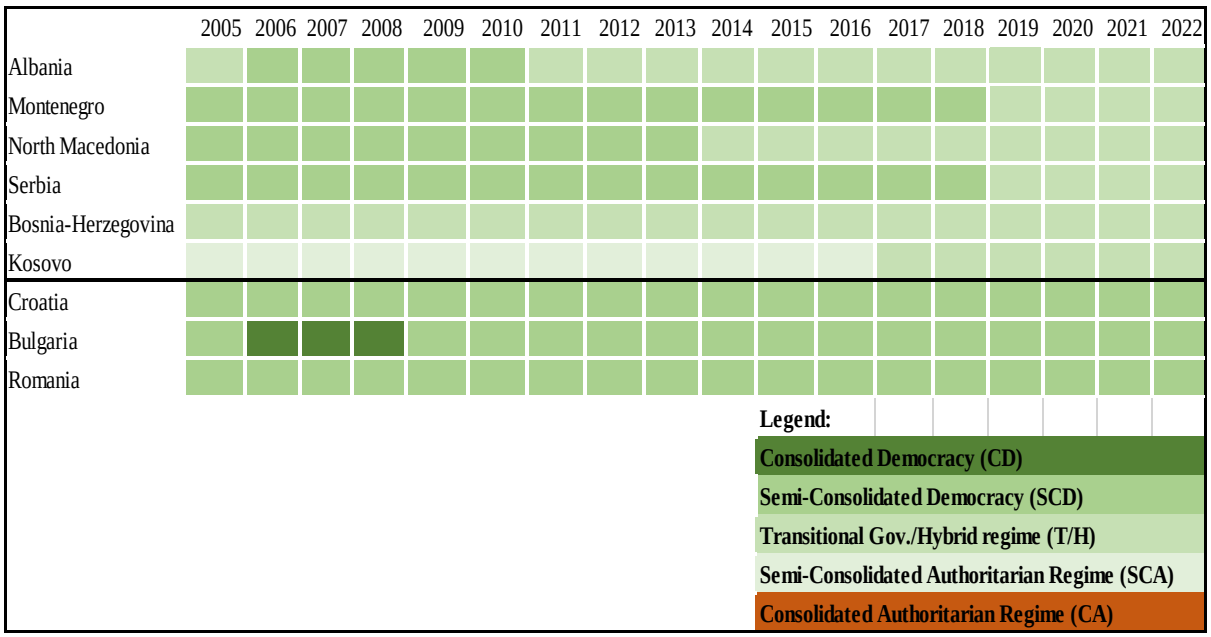


Figure 4: Democracy Score Over Time (2005-2022) (Source: Authors' illustration; NIT 2022)

While Romania and Croatia were considered *semi-consolidated democracies* throughout the whole period, Bulgaria was a *consolidated democracy* between the years 2006 and 2008 and then fell back into the categorization of a semi-consolidated democracy due to its decline of democracy percentage measured.

Based on the data provided by Nations in Transit for the Western Balkan countries from 2005-2022, the analysis of the democracy percentages and the related regime classifications indicates (Figure 4) that the most common regime classification for the Western Balkan countries is that of a *transitional* or *hybrid regime*, meaning that those countries are still in the process of transitioning towards greater democratic consolidation. Kosovo shows the lowest level of democracy percentage compared to other Western Balkan countries. However, it is the only country in the region that has shown signs of constant progress, upgrading from a semi-authoritarian regime to a transitional one.

On the contrary, the democracy percentage of Albania, Serbia, and Montenegro declined, leading to a downgrade of regime classification. While Albania was considered a semi-consolidated democracy between 2006 and 2011, indicating a relatively high level of democratic performance during that period, Serbia and Montenegro were the best performers in the region, being categorized as semi-consolidated democracies in the timespan from 2005 until 2018. However, data emphasizes that most WB6 faced significant challenges resulting in democratic backsliding and back-shifting to transitional and hybrid regimes.

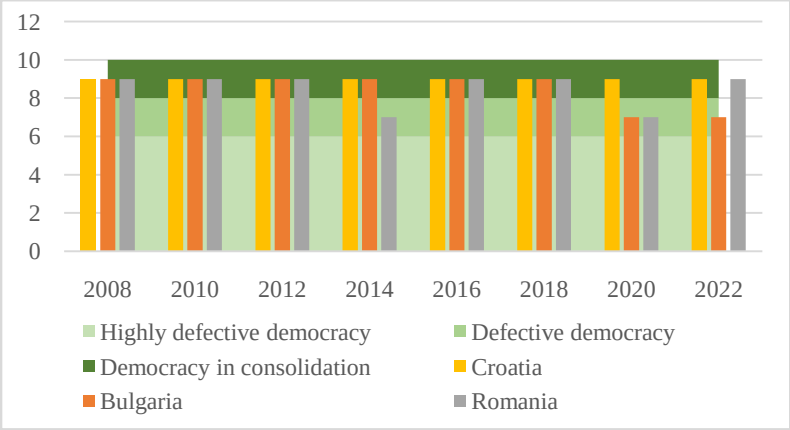


Figure 5: Democracy Status (Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia) (Source: Authors' illustration; BTI 2022)[1]

Also, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) shows, in general, a higher democratic standard when comparing Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia to the WB6. Nevertheless, as Figure 5 indicates, although Bulgaria was categorized as a democracy in consolidation for most of the time, a democratic backsliding has been evident since 2020, turning Bulgaria into a defective democracy, according to BTI. While Bulgaria exhibited signs of regression in 2014 and 2020 and was described as a defective democracy, it is noteworthy that Romania also experienced similar setbacks during those years. Nevertheless, it is essential to emphasize that, as evidenced, the three countries under consideration were primarily democracies in a phase of consolidation.

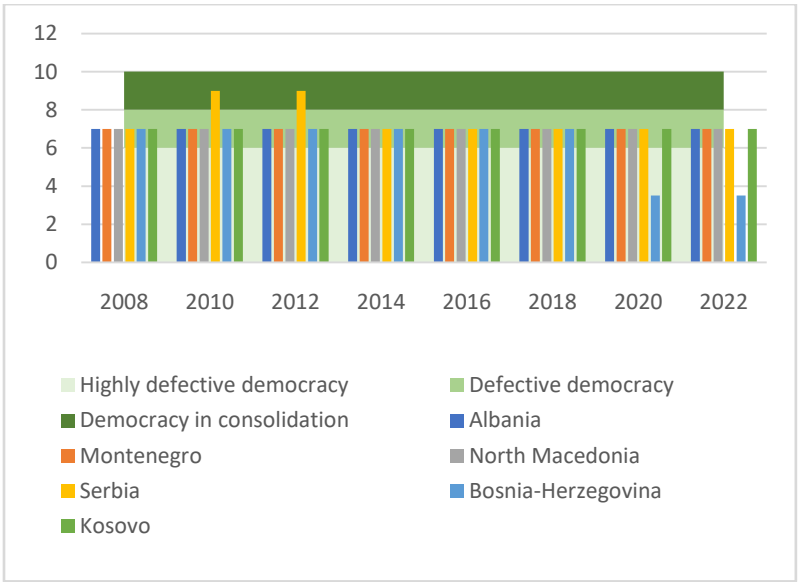


Figure 6: Democracy Status (Western Balkan countries) (Source: Author's illustration; BTI 2022)

[1]For the purpose of this analysis, categories of "hardline autocracies" and "moderate autocracies" are excluded.

In the meantime, it is reflected (Figure 6) that all six Western Balkan countries are and were, mainly throughout the whole period taken into consideration, defective democracies.

Evidence indicates two particular moments for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina: while Serbia made some efforts to perform democratic standards better and improving slightly their democracy status, being categorized as a moderate democracy or democracy in consolidation in the years 2010 and 2012, Bosnia and Herzegovina shows the highest decline in terms of democracy status compared to other countries of the region, being the only WB country considered a highly defective democracy.

Discussion on Findings: Influencing Factors on the Weakened EU's Transformative Power

As the creation of stable systems cannot be in the EU's long-term perspective, especially considering a region that hopes to join the European family as soon as possible, it is essential to elaborate on the main reasons impacting, firstly on the non-complete democratization of the WB6, and secondly, the determination of the EU to influence, beyond mere stabilization, the radical democratic transformation of the region. Considering this, we must admit that the reasons hampering the consolidation of democracy are to be categorized by a two-fold approach. In contrast, the reasons are both EU-driven and country-specific. In addition, the reasons are also explained by the driving forces of a broader geopolitical context.

Firstly, the EU's ability to justify and further enhance its role as a promoter of democracy in the WB6 has been limited mainly due to its lack of reciprocal willingness. The Western Balkan countries' accession process is characterized by a slow and tedious pace of progress, reflecting a stagnating or probably a regressing transformative power of the EU.

Although the EU offered the prospect of membership to the countries in the region nearly two decades ago, the accession process has been slow, with many delays and particularly uncertain, which has not only limited the incentives for reforms but opened the gate for other external actors. Uncertainty, in terms of clear timelines, was often criticized as it "leaves the EU unable to exert time pressure on the governments of the region to carry out necessary democratic reforms" (Renner and Trauner 2009, 462). From the analysis, it is evident that the expected impact of the EU is not transposed in a substantial democratic performance of WB countries, mainly Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania.

Despite the long and tortuous path toward EU membership, the current internal debates within the EU about the enlargement process and the criteria for accession have created additional uncertainty for the region, resulting in non-consistency when achieving benchmarks. Despite the EU's proactive role in advocating democratic values and concepts, we must acknowledge that the EU lacks a transparent assessment methodology when it comes to measuring the democratic performance of various political systems. This lack of clarity led to difficulties in translating political criteria benchmarks (Dimitrova 2016, 10), which, in the end, must be held accountable for the more significant difficulties in assessing the countries' democratic performance by the monitoring reports from the European Commission.

In addition, the lost credibility in the EU's method of sticks and carrots contributes to a hampering effect of democratic transformation in the WB6. On the one hand, this is attributed to a lack of determination in addressing failed progress in democratic reforms (Kmezic 2019, 99) and, on

the other side, caused by the EU's failure when it comes to rewarding progress. Scholars argue that the lack of rewarding progress is mainly attributed to institutional issues and the so-called institutional paradox in enlargement policies (Vogel 2018, 27). As a result, the lack of common understanding between existing Member States drags the whole enlargement process for the region (Vogel 2018, 23).

It seems that the protracted enlargement process has limited the momentum for deeper democratic reforms in the West Balkans. This is endorsed also by the fact that countries that have been granted candidate status have typically made greater progress in implementing democratic reforms than those that have not. One can argue that they have benefited from greater access to financial and technical assistance from the EU, enabling them to make further progress in areas related to their democratic performance. However, on the other side, it is also important to note that the Western Balkan countries with a granted candidacy status still face significant challenges.

In 2020, the EC adopted a New Enlargement Methodology as a revised enlargement instrument to be applied to Albania and North Macedonia. This new methodology aimed to boost and reinforce the negotiation process, transforming it into a more political, more exigent and dynamic, more transparent and credible, and less bureaucratic process. A stronger focus has been put on the rule of law, given that anti-corruption work has been mainstreamed in relevant chapters. In order to address profound political transformation, there has also been a heightened emphasis on the fundamental aspects of democratic institution operation, public administration reform, and the support of economic reforms. Progress on the fundamental reforms will determine the overall pace of negotiations (EC 2020). However, it is also articulated that this new methodology is and probably will be, too recent for any visible results in the short term (ECA 2022).

However, political realities cannot be altered if the recipient acts stubbornly. Secondly, one of the main challenges the EU faces in its efforts to promote transformation in the Western Balkans has been the insufficient domestic political will to drive the necessary reforms in the whole region of WB (ECA 2022). Despite the EU's support for democratic institutions and the rule of law, corruption, and political patronage remain significant obstacles to reform in many countries in the region. In most WB6 countries, this lack of political will, combined with internal instability, results from partocratic regimes defined by a strong elite dominance (Lemstra 2020, 4).

This is most noticeable in times of crisis or extraordinary circumstances, as it was highlighted further during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to a further deterioration of democracy in the region (Dafa 2020, 10). To address these challenges and strengthen its transformative role in the Western Balkans, there is further emphasis on the need for the European Commission to (1) strengthen the mechanism for promoting rule of law reforms in the enlargement process, (2) intensify support for civil society engaged in rule of law reforms and media independence; (3) reinforce the use of conditionality in IPA III; and (4) strengthen project reporting and monitoring (ECA 2022).

In addition, the EU's ability to transform the region has been put to the test and, in some cases, also limited by the broader geopolitical context. The region has been subject to competition between external actors, including Russia, China, and Turkey. Besides Russia, which has always had a more proactive role in some parts of the Western Balkans, in recent years, a more active engagement of China in the WB6 has been noticed, especially after the Covid-19 outbreak and the so-called "mask-diplomacy" as highlighted by scholars such as Ilik and Shapkoski (2022, 104).

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Nevertheless, Russia's influence in the region is particularly evident and, now more than ever, crucial in determining the WB6's political direction. From a historical point of view, the Western Balkans represent an area where Russia tries to be a long-time actor. It seems evident that the Kremlin has relatively strong historical ties with the Balkan countries and holds a relatively soft power attraction for them, especially for Serbia. Historical ties go back to the 19th-century Pan-Slavic movement and Russia's support for Serbia's independence from the Ottoman Empire (Stanicek and Caprile 2022).

Finally, religious connections are also very important for Slavic countries in the region. More specifically, Moscow plays the shared cultural and religious ties card among the region's Orthodox Christian population, which constitutes significant percentages in Bosnia in addition to majorities in Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Thus, Serbia has been perceived as Russia's kin state in the region (Karcic 2022). This is especially important when religious connections are usually considered gate-openers for more consequential deals, including in strategic sectors such as energy and real estate, and hence gradually lead to political and economic dependence (Karcic 2022). In general, the political influence from abroad has complicated the EU's efforts to promote stability and democracy, particularly given the region's strategic location and natural resources.

CONCLUSION

The EU's transformative potential is fully achieved at the Mediterranean enlargement and shows signs of weakness in the following enlargement rounds. Especially in the WB region enlargement wave, it is confirmed and evident that the EU has a hampered transformative role due to various reasons.

Despite the EU's evolution from formal criteria to conditions on substantive democracy showcasing its role as a democracy promotor, the lack of formal mechanisms to regulate and monitor compliance among Member States and troubled candidate states raised concerns by not only hampering the EU's commitment to further enlargement rounds but rather calling into question the EU's role as a transformative power.

Although the EU has acted as a key factor when it comes to democracy promotion in the Mediterranean enlargement, its ability to act continuously as a transformative power has been limited by a wide range of factors that are mainly EU-driven. Indeed, the complexities and difficulties encountered in previous enlargement rounds led to a cautious approach toward future enlargement rounds. The EU became more mindful of the need for effective mechanisms to monitor compliance and address potential challenges. This awareness contributed to the hesitance surrounding the inclusion of further enlargement rounds in the EU's political agenda, which led automatically to a protracted process of adhesion for the Western Balkan countries.

A distinction between the EU's transformative inputs and the WB region's capacity to absorb and deliver outcomes must be considered. The lack of democratic performance of the WB6 is not just an EU failure. However, it is part of a vicious circle that goes along with considerable internal political instability, including the (lack of) commitment of governments to reform, which contributes significantly to the democratic performance of the Western Balkan countries. When criticizing the EU for its lack of transformative power, one should be aware of the difficulties and challenges this region

poses as the powder keg of Europe, with all its wars, historical and cultural ties with external actors, and a distinctively different political culture.

Nevertheless, it is essential that the EU, especially in times of uncertainties and crisis, rethink and revitalize its democracy-promoting mechanisms to rebuild and re-test itself as a transformative power. Given the EU's inability to transform the Western Balkan countries into consolidated democracies, new questions may arise and become subjects for further research. Firstly, one should elaborate on the non-linear and non-constant path of transforming the WB6, which is related to a so-called paradigm shift of the EU in assessing democratic performance. The EU's transformative power would be challenged in this context due to a changed theoretical approach. This approach is especially intriguing when considering that, as shown also with the example of Romania, existing EU Member States have experienced democratic backsliding, which raises concerns about the overall state of democracy in the EU.

Secondly, although one can argue that it is important to distinguish between individual Member States' democratic challenges and the EU's commitment to democratic governance as a collective entity, the trend of democratic decline may hamper the maintenance of democratic standards of the Union in general and lead (un-)willingly to a paradigm shift in conditionality policies. This, in turn, questions whether the EU is about to reshape itself from a transformative power into a guardian of stabilitocracies. Is it assumable that the EU will be satisfied with consolidated stabilitocracies instead of consolidated democracies? In other words, will being a stabilitocracy be enough for joining the EU? This question is particularly important considering further enlargement rounds with countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Finally, it is crucial to analyze whether the Western Balkan countries (or at least some of them) will internalize themselves as a spoiler, creating a club of spoilers, to challenge the EU's democratic paradigm by questioning or even transforming it.

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CRediT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Doris Malaj: Conceptualization, resources, writing - original draft (lead), writing - reviewing and editing, supervision.
Elena Polo: Methodology, formal analysis, writing - original draft (supporting), visualization.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the article.

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