Western Balkans Integration into European Union: Challenges and Consequences

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Abstract. This paper is intended to analyze the challenges and consequences of the integration of Western Balkans to the European Union. Specifically, in the first case, challenges of this integration path and in the second case the consequences as a result of eventual stagnation in this path. For more than a century, the Western Balkans region has been seeking its way of European transformation. The region remains in the agenda of European Union expansion, but even after two decades of promises, the integration of Western Balkan countries to EU is not certain. The integration journey is first of all closely connected to building the institutional capacities, adoption of laws, rules, norms and European behavior in the domestic policymaking. Therefore, the challenges are converted into obstacle or inability to the establishment of values, identity, institutional and social aspects in the Western Balkan countries, whereas the consequences are reflected as derivatives of failure to accomplishing the membership of the region to EU. Based on the research conducted on this issue, this study argues that such challenges as lack of rule of law, high levels of corruption and organized crime are derivatives of historical legacy and political elite efforts to capture the state or dominate certain state resources, as well as of the EU approach towards this region. This study is important particularly in this aspect and unequivocally presents the common and separate challenges of the Western Balkans towards integration into the European Union. Along with this realistic presentation, the consequences themselves appear which first of all are not only to the detriment of the Western Balkans.

Keywords: integration; challenges; consequences; European Union; Western Balkans.

INTRODUCTION

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Central and Eastern Europe were pervaded by a democratic change wave which in turn culminated with the accession into the European Union (EU) in the period 2004–2007. The countries of the Western Balkans (WB) experienced a different fate from the Central and Eastern Europe countries. In the nineties of the previous century, these countries experienced consequent wars and destabilization politics whose origin may be sought in the historical legacy of the countries in the region, in the strategic decisions of the political elites and in the economic crisis that prevailed in the region during those years. All this disruptive situation resulted, on the one hand, from the weakening of the state, consequently the lack of rule of law, high levels of corruption and organized crime, extensive patronage and informality networks [2], and on the other due to the lack of a European perspective (in the 1990s, the EU was engaged in this region mainly in humanitarian activities), as well as doubling the European policy between stabilization and democratization towards the region [6, 8, 40]. Since the first initiative of the EU towards the region, along with the democratization, another very important dimension has been the stabilization. Such approach from the EU has been criticized by many scholars, who consider that the EU has favoured the second dimensions to the detriment of the first. This the EU behaviour towards the region has led to the use of the term stabilocracy by some scholars [7] to describe the political systems of WB countries. A stabilocracy according to Florian Bieber [8]", means 'a regime that is characterized by considerable deficiencies in the aspect of democratic governance, but it enjoys external legitimacy providing assumed stability'.

For Antoinette Primatarova and Johanna Deimel [41], a stabilocracy 'ensures external stability, but internally it sways between democracy and autocratic tendencies'. So, stabilization has two main features: one is the external support or legitimacy that is provided by the EU/EU countries as a result of the promise of developing democratic reforms, but above all, the promise of maintaining regional stability, while the other is the derivative of the former. The EU approach to the region, respectively the external legitimacy that local actors benefit from European countries, has left their way to adopting undemocratic and authoritarian power-holding and preservation practices "as discussed by Bieber [7, 8]" by utilizing democratic ways. Today 'autocrats in the Western Balkans rule through informal power structures, state capture by ruling parties, patronage and media control' [5]. In their overall nuances and features and contexts, more or less political systems in the WB countries are defective democracies [37], respectively competitive authoritarians [33]. All this context is also reflected in the February 2018 strategy 'A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans', where the European Commission distinguishes the main political challenges WB countries are facing in their path towards EU membership. These challenges include: rule of law, fundamental rights and good governance, strengthening of democratic institutions, economic reform/creation of a competitive economy, fight against corruption and organized crime as well as resolving the bilateral problems and deepening the regional cooperation [18].

Aim and objectives of the study

The main goal of this study is to identify the main political challenges WB countries are facing on their path towards EU membership and elaboration thereof. Another goal of this study is the dissolution or the dismantling of the consequences that would diverge for the EU as well as for the WB countries in case of failure of this region to get the membership in the EU. This way, the objective of the study is twofold. On the one hand, it is aimed at identifying and analyzing the political challenges faced by WB countries in their path of approximation and their ultimate membership in the EU. The other objective is focused ad dismantling the consequences deriving from non-

membership of WB countries to the EU, both for the region and for the EU itself.

Research questions

1. What are the WB countries challenges on their path towards membership in the EU?

2. What consequences would the EU and the WB region face in case of non-membership of these countries in the EU?

Methodology

For research purposes, author used the comparative method applied in case studies. Referred to Bob Matthews and Liz Ross: 'Comparative researches often use the multiple case study model, which allows for in-depth study of each case, and aims to explain similarities and differences between cases' [36]. This way, the level of analysis in this study is twofold. On the one hand, we compare not only the challenges of the WB region on the path to EU membership, but also the disputes leading to emergence of these challenges, while on the other hand, we analyze and compare the consequences that would arise for the WB and the EU countries in case of non-membership of this region. The research strategy used to develop empirical research is the qualitative case study. The approach of case studies allows us to deeply analyze the challenges of the WB region. Inter alia, according to Robert K. Yin [51], a case study is first and foremost an 'empirical investigation investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear'. Thus, the empirical analysis covers the whole spectrum of national cases in the WB region, focusing on the will of the political elites and the role of historical legacy from the 1990s, respectively the challenges that have caused the occurrence of these two factors on the path to the EU membership. This variety of empirical cases enables us to compare the challenges between countries and contexts. To respond to research questions, this study is based on existing literature and sources such as European Commission reports, OSCE/ODIHR reports, field research, articles and newspaper interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical framework: From Balkanization to Europeanization: The multi-level process of WB integration in the EU

The 90s of the last century were dramatic for the WB region. On the one hand, the inter-ethnic conflicts broke out leading to the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, while on the other side Albania's 1997 plunge into riots led to almost decline of the state. All these events, in the literature, were reflected in terms such as 'delayed transition', 'double transition' to the term 'Balkanization', which means fragmentation or division of the whole into small pieces. However, the term 'Balkanization' opposes the concept of Europeanization, which primarily implies integration, respectively referred to Claudio Radaelli [42], Europeanization has to do with a process of: 'a) construction, b) diffusion, c) and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy models, styles, ways of doing things and common norms or beliefs that have been established and consolidated at the EU policy level, which are then included in the logic of local discourse, identity, political structures and public policy '. In this way, Europeanization emerges as a theory which first of all investigates the impact the EU has on the internal change of states, which is generally influenced by the three dimensions of politics: policy, politics and polity [14]. Impacts on the internal change of states are exercised by the EU through the mechanisms of socialism, externalities, imitation and first of all and foremost through the conditioning mechanism [45]. According to Tanja A. Borzel [9], 'conditionality can have a decisive influence on the readiness of countries to meet the EU standards and to enforce its obligations '. However '1) internal reforming elites should be able to prioritize the EU requirements and 2) functional state institutions should be able to coordinate and carry out field reforms'[15] However, in the WB region, both dimensions have shown to be incapable of supporting and implementing the Europeanization process. On the one hand, political elites are ineffective, corrupt, self-interested in capturing the state or certain state segments or sources, so generally reformist elites have seemed weak to undertake reforms and radical changes [14, 1, 7]. On the other hand, weak administrative and human capacities (human resources tend to migrate abroad), extensive patronage networks, historical legacy and other illnesses make the

process of WB Europeanization seem to be among the most difficult [1, 4]. All this context and experience with past enlargements has pushed the EU to undertake a new expansion approach that "has transformed the standard expansion policy, which was previously applied to candidates" [15] Different from the Central and Eastern Europe countries, where:

'conditionality was an integral part of the integration process, designed as an instrument to force candidate countries to meet the legal, economic and technical requirements of EU membership in the Western Balkans, the EU used conditioning at a very early stage' [13].

So we have a move from what is known as 'Europeanization through enlargement' [14] to 'Europeanization before accession' [13]. However, unlike the Central and Eastern European countries, the process of Europeanization in the WB region spans a broader range of issues ranging from 'security and peacebuilding, border issues, reconstruction and development, and the transition agenda, to the post-communist association' [1]. So in WB's case, we are dealing with a multidimensional process of transformation involving the post-communist, post-conflict and post-nationalist transformation' [15]. Throughout this multiple processes of transformation, the focus of the analysis of this study will be the will of the political elites, respectively the response of local stakeholders to these challenges and the role of the political heritage of the 1990s in the integration process.

Challenges of WB Countries on Their Path towards Membership in the EU

Historical Legacy from the First Transition: Responses of Elites to it

In the WB region, unlike the experiences of Central Europe and Baltic countries, the communist regimes were replaced, and somewhere they were transformed into competitive authoritarianism, the legitimacy of which was different. While in Albania the promise of building democracy and raising prosperity was the main legitimizing premise of the regime in Serbia, nationalism and nationalist mobilization served as the main weapon for the legitimacy of the communist elites now transformed into a nationalist.

However, due to the failure to meet these agendas, in the late 1990s most of these regimes broke down almost throughout the entire WB region, but they left behind them a political legacy that turns out to be destructive, not just for democracy but also for the state's capacity and capabilities to act. Referring to Othon Anastsakis, there are five legacy dimensions from the transition of the 1990-ties that the WB countries are facing. These areas include personal clashes; national and ethnic agendas; high-level corruption; people's discontent [2].

Personal Clashes: Personalization of politics and political battles – is a characteristic not only of the first transition but also to what is known as a second transition. The failure to initiate a transition by agreement and then the failure to reach a consensus on the modalities of transition led to the fragmentation of the political scene, namely its polarization. Consequently, this situation led to the failure to establish strong and stable institutions and incited the creation of undetermined ideological agendas and paved the way for personal ambitions [1]. All this resulted in the concentration of power in the hands of individuals, respectively led to the establishment of presidential; semi-presidential political systems.

'The establishment of presidential or semi-presidential political systems and the limited impact of controls and balances allowed personal policies to develop and root themselves in the political process of most countries, whereby power-sharing and co-existence agreements became a personal struggle for power and political survival' *[2].*

Even after the break-up of these regimes and the constitution of parliamentary systems, polarization between political forces, respectively between leaders, is present. Referred to Valerie Bunce [11], polarization resulted to be harmful for the political competition. Political competition is one of the basic conditions for holding free and fair elections, yet polarization undermines it, and thus violates the elections, which are the basic principle of democracy. Such election problems that cause distortion of election results such as phantom voter turnout or inaccuracy of voter registers, threats and pressure on voters, and vote buying, bias or favouring some parties in coverage of electoral activities by the media, non-

eligibility between state and electoral activities, use of state resources for electoral purposes, multiple vote, political influence on the Election Commission [31], are present in all WB countries. All these problems are a derivative of polarization, which translates into unspecified political behaviour or extreme positions simplified in a fierce struggle for power, which then promotes competition, respectively personal political ambitions for seizing and controlling state resources to raise and maintaining dominant positions on the political scene. The entire such situation creates a suitable habitat for networks of patronage, nepotism, corruption as well as organized crime. However, despite the similarity in this aspect, the trajectories of rising to dominant positions, or even the decline of these positions of certain elites has been different amongst WB countries.

While in Serbia, with the fall of Slobodan Milosevic's power, between the coalition partners, the Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska Stranka Srbije: DSS) of Vojislav Kostunica and the Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka: DS) of Zoran Djindjic and later Boris Tadic began a fierce competition for dominating the political stage and the state resources [43]. This competition was won by the DS as a result of the broad international support it enjoyed, thanks to its image of a liberal Pro-European party. Nevertheless, as Florian Bieber [7] expresses, the DS reformists turned to be only: 'builders of institutions hesitating [..., who] instead of decisively decapitating undemocratic practices, continued to rely on them and often did not want to strengthen the independence of the institutions and the Constitution'. This hesitation of DS reformists was condemned in the 2012-2013 elections, which in power brought the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka: SNS) of Aleksandar Vucic, who is the dominant political figure in Serbia, whose power is compared to that of Slobodan Milosevic in the 90-ties[48]. So in Serbia, the trajectory has gone from the dominance competition to the total domination of Aleksandar Vucic.

In Albania, the transition since its beginnings has been followed by an extreme polarization between the main political forces of the Democratic Party (Partia Demokratike: PD) and Socialist Party (Partia Socialiste: PS) whose effects have touched the vital functions of the state, thus undermining the capabilities and capacity of the state because of their inrush with party militants. However, despite that, no party in Albania has

managed to maintain dominance for more than eight years. Milo Djukanovic's dominance continues in Montenegro as a result of a combination of internal factors, such as ethnic divisions on the basis of which clientele and external networks have been organized. Milo Djukanovic and his party machine have profiled themselves as a Western party, while on the other side there are pro-Russian opposition parties in such a situation. In Northern Macedonia after a decade-long dominance of Nikola Gruevski, which in the European Commission's report of 2016 was considered a seizure of the state, which had the negative impact 'on the functioning of democratic institutions and key societal areas', the change came in the 2016 election, where Zoran Zaev's SDSM managed to form the government, while the latter was elected prime minister. Bosnia and Herzegovina presents the most complicated case in the WB region due to how the state is organized and functioning. The organization and functioning, respectively the division of the country on an ethnic basis and the institutionalization of ethnicities have created a habitat suitable for ethno-nationalist parties to exercise control over the ethnic entities to which they belong. In this way, in Bosnia and Herzegovina we are dealing with feudalism of power, where each ethnic-nationalist party exercises control over its feud. This way of exercising power shows that although there is a crucial division in Bosnian politics, Bosnians, Serbs and Croats have a similar vision of "completely patrimonial power dominated by great man [38]. In Kosovo, since the end of 2007, the Democratic Party of Kosovo continues to be in power, which during this time has shared power with various Albanian parties and with Serbian minority and other minorities, however, this party has maintained its dominant positions over state resources.

Nationalist and ethnic agendas – in the 90-ties were the core of the political parties' projects. Moreover, these agendas have served as a legitimate basis for certain leaders or parties such as in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Northern Macedonia. However, with the end of the Kosovo conflict, the fall of Slobodan Milosevic's power and the signing of the Ohrid Agreement as the basis for the end of the inter-ethnic conflict in Northern Macedonia, the EU initiated the process of transforming this ethnic-nationalist context. The process of de-nationalism has the regional co-operation as its main mechanism, respectively the initiation and deepening of cooperation.

Through this process and its mechanism, the EU aims to create economic and political interdependence between the WB countries and consequently the cultural diversification of the countries of the region. 'The importance of regional cooperation is highlighted by two main benefits. First, it reduces tension and strengthens regional stability [...] and secondly, it brings various practical benefits' [32]. However, despite this the EU investment, the deepening of regional cooperation is hampered by Serbia's dispute regarding Kosovo and other bilateral and inter-ethnic problems between and within the countries of the WB region. Stability and regional sustainability are threatened by ghosts of the past. Nationalism continues to be emphasized in Serbia. Today, there are governing parties that ruled during Slobodan Milosevic's era, while the latter is considered by President Aleksandar Vucic to be a great leader with good intentions but poor results [12]. So in this way, Aleksandar Vucic crosses Slobodan Milosevic for lost wars, but not for their commencement. This approach, first of all, proves that while 'conservative and radical socialist parties in Serbia change and reform, they are always the remnants of the conflicting context of the 1990s' [2], and flirtation or nationalist feelings continue to remain one of their major dimensions of discourse and politics. In Northern Macedonia, after the inter-ethnic conflict and the successes of liberal politics, ethnic politics continued to be the focus of political projects. VMRO-DPMNE of Nikola Gruevski, which dominated Macedonian politics for ten years, is the best illustrative example of this approach. During VMRO-DPMNE's governance, populism and ethno-nationalism were the two main dimensions of leading elite' policies and discourses. This discourse was also reflected in the 2016 election, when the SDSM's liberal-civil project opposed the fears of Nikola Gruevski's nationalist rhetoric.

'During the electoral campaign Gruevski used nationalist rhetoric, relying mainly on the language of fear in the sense of redefining and separating the state from foreign and internal enemies. This rhetoric was often pushed to the extreme, as Gruevski alluded to the possibility of a violent conflict' [47].

This nationalist discourse that fostered fear of the other aimed at creating an extreme ethnic

polarization that would secure and consolidate a government mandate for VMRO-DPMNE. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Dayton agreement institutionalized ethnic agendas. The constitution is designed and organized in such a way that it distributes power. However, the basis that has served as the foundation for power distribution is the ethnic basis. So, all political life in Bosnia and Herzegovina today is organized on an ethnic basis, including electoral zones. All this has created a habitat suitable for continuing and strengthening the discourse and nationalist agendas which remain the number one preference for voters [39]. "Ethno-nationalist political parties have dominated the political sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the first democratic elections held in the early 1990s'. The dominance of these parties continued even after the end of the conflict and the reaching of the Dayton Accords: 'Such a preference for rigorous ethnic parties by the BiH electorate has been repeated in every election with the exception of the year 2000, when the Social Democratic Party (SDP), one of the rare examples of multi-ethnic political parties in Bosnia, won the elections. So, what has happened to Bosnia is not a democratic transition, it rather is an ethnocratic transition' [10]. As a result of the dominance of these ethno-nationalist agendas, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to be a controversial country on the one hand from Republika Srpska (Serb ethnicity within Bosnia) whose leaders have repeatedly repeated the threats of holding a referendum on independence, and on the other by Croat ethnicity, who consider that they are discriminated against, and in 2000 and then in 2011 they organized illegal forms of self-government [30]. Kosovo similar to Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to be contested by the local Serb community, especially those from the northern part, who continue to reject integration in the Republic of Kosovo, as a result of their instrumentalization by the leaders and politics of Serbia, which contests and refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence. Against Kosovo's statehood, since the day of the declaration of independence, Serbia has undertaken diplomatic offensives which tend to impede its international affirmation and consolidation. While in the internal and regional plan, this relationship is occasionally accompanied by provocations and tensions that best represent the unstable situation of the region. We would draw attention to some time ago blockages of streets by local Serbs through barricades

or trying to drive in a Serbian train with nationalist inscriptions in the territory of Kosovo. For resolving these disputes, the EU has initiated a dialog between the two countries since 2013; however the dominant agendas in this process continue to remain ethnic agendas. Even in Montenegro, just as in Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, party structuring is organized on an ethnic basis where Montenegrins are represented or gathered around the party of Milo Djukanovic, while on the other side there are Serbian nationalist parties that are in opposition. So in general, in the WB region 'ideologies along the right-to-left line remain the second in voter preferences, which continue to vote according to nationalistic and ethnic agendas' [2] , only Albania has shown to be immune from this symptom.

High Levels of Corruption – which in the beginning of transition has been a major problem for WB societies in the region. Rosa Balfour and Corina Stratulat [3] discuss a uniform scenario involving the political elites of all Balkan countries. This scenario first assumes that in the moments of political and economic transformations, political elites used the vacuum created so that political and economic reforms are compiled in accordance with their personal interests and status. This strategy proved to be successful in many countries, which made it difficult to distinguish between politicians, businessmen and magistrates. In these cases, 'the government acted more as a clenched hand than as an invisible hand and intentionally induced partial reforms to the general goal of seizing the state'. According to Othon Anastasakis [2], the beginning of transition determines its continuation, respectively 'early transition years lay the foundations for a climate of corruption'. Such a corrupt climate despite its improvement during 2008-2011 (see metering indices) has followed and continued to dominate policy at the highest level in all WB countries. Today the WB region is one of the most corrupt in Europe, while the problems lie in a wide range of issues identified by the European Commission reports. Referring to the European Commission's 2018 reports on the WB countries, it appears that in terms of the fight against corruption, countries like Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have a level of preparation compared to Kosovo, which is defined as a country that is at an early stage of preparation and at the same time has a level of preparation (see European Commission reports for each country for 2018).

These Commission Reports highlight weaknesses in the fight against corruption. These issues include: weak institutional capacities and lack of inter-institutional cooperation; Concerning remains the unwillingness of governments to strengthen the role and ensure the independence of the institutions dealing with the fight against corruption; bringing corrupt cases of high political levels to justice and confiscating property from crime continue to stagnate; the non-financing of political party financing also continues to be a problem that requires solutions (see European Commission reports for each country for 2018).

Political Elites: From the Competition to Domination and the State Capture

The EU's February 2018 strategy towards the WB region states, inter alia states that 'countries show clear elements of state capture, including links to organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, and a strong confusion of public and private interests'. The capture of the state under Transparency International (2009) represents the situation in which some powerful persons either institutions or groups of individuals shape the political and economic environment of a country in their favour through the instrument of corruption [50].

However: 'capture of the state can be widely understood [as well] as disproportionate and unregulated influence of interest groups or decision-making processes, where particular interest groups reach to disseminate laws, policies and regulations of the state through such practices as illicit contributions paid by private interests for political parties and elections, campaigns, parliamentary purchase of votes, purchase of presidential decrees or judicial decisions, as well as through illegal lobbying and rotation appointments' [35].

So, in its entirety, the capture of the state is understood as appropriation or control of state resources by elites, which then use these resources either for personal gains or for political gains, thus causing the deformation of the democratic process [28, 26]. Forms of state capture and capture types are different, for Lily Evelina Sitouris [46] in discussing the type of state capture, the emphasis should be on the institutions that are

the subject of capture and the type of actors that aim at capture in the wake of this logic referring to Mihaly Fazekas and Istvan Janos Toth [27], the capture appears to us to be of two types: local, which means entering into a relationship captured only by some public and private organizations, thus leaving a certain number of 'islands' relatively autonomous and global, which presents the situation when an elite at the national level controls the captured organizations that are related to each other. Even in the type of state capture provided by Abby Innes [29], the capture of the state appears to be of two types: capture of the state by the party and capture of the state by corporations. The former implies the politicization or repopulation of state institutions by political parties in order to pursue and secure political monopoly, while the latter is defined as the exercise of power by private interests through the overthrow of legitimate channels of political influence. However, in the case of the countries of the WB region, we are dealing with the first type, that is, with the capture of the state by the party, where after the progress of the early 2000s in the construction of independent institutions we already have a politicization of these institutions and party control over them. 'This reassurance of party control is articulated through the erosion of independent institutions, the penetration of state administration by party members and the use of informal mechanisms to provide control '[7]. Instruments used for appropriation or control of state resources by the elites are different, however referring to Arolda Elbasani [16] in the case of Albania we are dealing with the capture of the state through the mechanism of the judiciary. Characteristics similar to that of Albania show all WB countries where the functioning and independence of the judiciary are seriously violated. According to the European Commission's 2018 reports, WB countries are considered to have reached a level of preparation in the judicial system field except for Kosovo, which is considered to be at an early stage of preparation (see European Commission reports for 2018). However, despite the distinctiveness of the rating, all countries throughout the WB region face similar problems in establishing the rule of law. Serbia since 2015 is considered to have achieved a level of preparation in the area of judicial system [17], but the progress achieved since then has been slow. Serbia's justice system continues to suffer from political influences; constitution and legal framework still leave room for political interfer-

ence. Pressures on the work of judges and prosecutors, as well as commentary on court cases by individuals at high political levels remain high. Furthermore, government control over the media and selective justice and impunity continue to be serious problems that oppose the establishment of rule of law. In Albania, the justice system characterized by profound politicization, biased justice, corruption, links to crime and politics, is presented as the weakest chain 'Achilles heel' of the system throughout the post-communist transition. To change this situation, a comprehensive justice reform has been initiated, with the aim of building the institutional and human capacities needed to ensure the rule of law. However, the speed with which this reform is being implemented and the political environment in which it is developing are two of the main concerns for the future of this reform and with it the justice system in general.

The justice system in Northern Macedonia, like that of Montenegro, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, has the same symptoms emerging in Serbia and Albania. Political interventions and impacts on the justice system, biased justice and lack of media freedom, commentary on judicial cases by senior government officials, corruption and links to organized crime are evident in each of these states (see European Commission reports on the year 2018). Thus, in general, the rule of law in the WB region remains weak due to the lack of willpower of the elites to strengthen the justice system, as this would also mean breaking the authoritarian practices and informal networks. Keeping the justice system weak, the political elites have succeeded in extending their power through corruption, clientelism, nepotism, patronage. The flow of state institutions and companies from party members is evident in all countries of the WB region. Contribution and loyalty to the party remain the two main premises for recruiting new members against whom the party has countermeasures that ensure their retention, such as the promise of employment and advancement, temporary positions, insecurity or fear of losing the job. However, in this entire state capture venture, ethnic divisions also contribute to Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo, as well as the EU's own approach towards the region has its contribution too.

'EU conditionality not only failed to effectively address state capture, but also inadvertently contributes to the consolidation of such processes by enabling informal networks to strengthen their control over power' [44]. According to Solveig Ritcher and Natasha Munsch, there are three causes that transform EU's conditionality into an instrument that helps in consolidation of the state capture: Firstly, in the absence of a comprehensive legal framework, the external pressure to liberalize the markets created favourable conditions or allowed a small political and economic elite to generate private benefits and influence political decision-making through powerful informal networks; Second, the powerful top-down conditionality eliminates almost any discussion on the domestic political scene and undermines the internal accountability mechanisms [44]. However, among other things, the EU's conditionality, especially in the area of rule of law and the fight against corruption, has been centred on what Jovana Marovic [34], says in quantity bypassing the quality by creating the right ground for governing elites to silence internal opponents; Thirdly, the interaction between the governing elites of the WB region countries with the EU officials or member states' officials or legitimacy benefiting WB's elites and leaders within this interaction [44].

'The rise of strong Balkan rulers, such as Nikola Gruevski (Republic of Northern Macedonia), Milorad Dodik (Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina), Milo Djukanovic (Montenegro) and Aleksandar Vucic (Serbia), and their party machinery, occurred under EU observation and often with silent support and approval. These autocratic minded leaders - of course, self-proclaimed as democratic and pro-European have been able to stand unmatched in their domestic political arena because there is no democratic acquis to bring the monopoly of power, organization of party and competition or informal practices' [49].

Possible consequences for WB and the EU countries in case of non-membership of the region in the European family

First scenario: Escalation of the Situation. Any forecast for the integration perspective of WB countries in the EU depends on three sets of factors: internal factors, regional factors and external factors or factors within the EU and its member states. The geopolitical orientation remains the key parameter for WB's integration into the EU. Today, when the new world order is facing

international terrorism, energy and financial crises, from the rise of authoritarian regimes and their new transcontinental alliances, the WB region still faces challenges and instability. Enlargement policy was and remained the most dynamic and successful the EU policy, but in the case of WB a hesitation is noticed. Today, even after 20 years of direct interference with the international community, the security situation in the WB region continues to be unstable. This situation led by a semi-authoritarian mentality leads us toward the premise of a fragile stability, with possibilities and potential for further escalation. The consequences of this escalation are serious obstacles to WB's progress towards integration into the EU. The democratic deficit within the EU is another element contributing to this situation. Double standards for the same criteria are explicit evidence for the escalation of this situation. The EU must be clear and straightforward that such a situation does not fall into the ruins of the end of the last century.

Second scenario: Implication of third actors: Division of WB into zones of influence. If regional instability rises due to lack of the EU courage, this would make the Balkans fertile land for foreign interventions. The Balkans is a competition arena between the foreign powers, drawing Russia, Turkey and China to a corner of Europe that has been largely under the influence of the EU and the US since the Yugoslav wars. To keep Russian and Chinese ambitions under control, Washington is ready to work with the EU to protect the interests of the West. Enlargement critics are right when they say that the quality of democracy and the rule of law in the Balkan countries are below the EU standards, but the WB needs the EU integration to relegate the many problems and challenges. The EU is putting as a condition for the eradication of organized crime and corruption, but is cutting funds along with the World Bank and other Western lenders for WB countries, enabling China to fill the void. Meanwhile, Balkan diplomacy experts say Russia has worked and is working hard to boost the impact on this part of Europe. WB is currently an arena of collisions between Russia on the one hand and, on the other hand, the US and the EU. In this situation, the membership of the entire WB in the EU is not simply a choice of Balkans, but also of EU itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Problems such as the lack of rule of law, high levels of corruption and organized crime, mismanagement, clientelism and nepotism are only derivatives of the irresponsible behaviour of political elites, namely the result of personal political ambitions for domination and capture of state resources. In this way, the political elites are the primary challenge in the path of the WB region towards the EU, the creation and emergence of democratic political elite, which is willing not only to transform the region's historical heritage but to build democracy and embed European values. Among other things, a challenge for the region on the journey to joining the European family remains the EU's own approach to WB. Taking into consideration the stability of the region, the EU, other than creating the space for capturing the state, has, in most cases, even legitimized the capturing leaders. Thus, the democratization of WB societies remains only a discursive dimension of the leading EU elites. Transformation of this approach and the persistence in the democratization of these societies remains critical for the future of the WB and the stability of the region and even of Europe. In the European Union, where the interests of member states dominate, allowing the new members to be blocked on their behalf would turn back the idea of this European project. In recent years, there has been a rise in euro-scepticism and the dilemma about enlargement, as member states and their citizens have been tired of previous enlargements. Yet now there seems to be hope for better. Election Results for the European Parliament held between 23 and 26 May 2019 have removed the dilemma of endangering the European Union's enlargement project with the Western Balkan countries. Pro-European parties have taken 80 percent of parliament seats. This is good news, because the anti-EU parties that have lost the majority are the ones that most opposed the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans.

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