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The Post-communist Transition of the Western Balkans: EUropeanisation with a Small Enlargement Carrot

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Introduction

Following the collapse of communism in the late 1980s and the opening of the European Union's enlargement process to the east, only three post-communist states from the Balkans—Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia—were able to meet the required conditions and become members of the European Union alongside their Balkan neighbour Greece and the other 24 members of this organisation. The other Balkan states, which were labelled (together with Croatia) the 'Western Balkans' by the EU in the late 1990s are still waiting to be 'further EUropeanised' and meet the EU's accession conditions. While EU officials and a number of scholars (e.g. Cirtautas & Schimmelfennig, 2010; Huntington, 1993, 1996; Janos, 2000; Seroka, 2008) argue that the main cause of the 'Europeanisation delay' of the Western Balkans lies primarily in the inability of the states' sociopolitical structures to adopt core EU norms

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and values—particularly those related to the functioning of institutions of democracy and respect of the rule of law—the reality appears to be less clear cut. A closer look at the empirical facts reveals that the agent-driven actions from both sides—the EU and the political leadership of its leading member states on the one side, and the political elites of the Western Balkan states on the other—have played a much stronger role in the (non) Europeanisation of the latter group of states, than have structural factors.

While Balkan countries were socio-economically less developed than the countries of East Central Europe (ECE) and the Baltics, political developments and conditions of multiparty authoritarianism in all these countries (with the exception of Czechoslovakia) were very similar before they fell under communist rule after the Second World War (Crampton, 1997; Petrovic, 2013; Rotshield, 1974). Forty years of communist institutional and ideological rebuilding have further equalised political and socio-economic conditions throughout the communist world. If there was an impact of past legacies on political and socio-economic developments and the different pace of post-communist transition after the collapse of communism, it was primarily related to the existence of differences in the character and strength of communist rule in particular groups of communist states and the impact that these differences have had on the formation (or non-formation) of pro-reformist and pro-EU political elites. As defined and argued by this author in his 2013 monograph (Petrovic, 2013), the key role in the creation of important anti-communist national(ist) and/or liberal democratic political alternatives in the ECE communist states played some weaknesses in rule of domestic communist elites, combined with a history of violent Soviet (or Soviet-driven) suppression of major protests and incentives for change or reform (Ekiert, 1996, 2003) and the existence of strong anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiment in the Baltic states, Poland and Hungary (but not in Czechoslovakia). The virtual non-existence of such political alternatives and, consequently, their pro-reformist post-communist successors in four Balkan communist

states[1] was primarily the result of the firm rule of domestic communist leaders who were able (in contrast to their counterparts in ECE) to secure some legitimacy for their rule. Some specific socio-economic structures established in these states throughout the period of communist rule, particularly those related to extensive industrialization and to (the related) significant increase in people's living standards during the period from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s were only of secondary importance in this regard. It was a corrective factor which helped the Balkan communists to (partially) legitimise their dictatorial rule (Petrovic, 2013, Chapter 3). Hence, the slow progress of all the Balkan states in post-communist reform and EUropeanisation (i.e. adoption of the core EU values and norms through the EU association and accession process—see section "EUropeanisation with an Ever-Increasing Number and Toughness of Conditions") during the 1990s, was a direct result of the lack of liberal democratic political forces and the establishment of the political system of so-called illiberal democracy[2] in these states after the collapse of communist rule.

However, if the Balkan peoples and their political leaders (most of whom were the members of the former communist *nomenklatura*) bear unto themselves the largest share of responsibility for the non-reformist pathways of their countries and the consequent establishment of much weaker links with the EU during the 1990s, they can hardly be (solely) blamed for the continuation of the slow pace of Europeanisation of their countries after the early 2000s, when all the Balkan states had elected pro-reformist and pro-EU governments. While the EU was fairly generous in providing accession assistance to the ECE and Baltic

[1]Albania, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia. After the violent dissolution of communist Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and separation of Montenegro and Kosovo from Serbia in 2006 and 2008, respectively, the present 'country account' of post-Yugoslav states in addition to these three also includes Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia (whose official name was FYR Macedonia until February 2019—see Footnote 12).

[2]which pretended rather than introduced necessary political democratisation and economic transformation/marketisation (Petrovic, 2013, pp. 108–113; Vachudova, 2005, pp. 37–59; Zakaria, 1977).

states during the 1990s and early 2000s, the accession offer given to the Western Balkan states in the Thessaloniki Agenda of 2003[3] was more conditional from the very beginning. Not only did the EU already in 2006 tighten the 1993 Copenhagen conditions for the Western Balkan membership candidates, but it has (in order to 'avoid repeating mistakes' from the 2004/07 enlargement round) continued to make these conditions even tougher and to introduce additional accession conditions for these states ever since.

The following section of the paper explains how the ever-increasing number and toughness of the accession conditions has become the main cause of the very slow progress of the Western Balkan states in their bid towards EU membership. The third, final section of the paper critically addresses the prospects for completing the accession process and (consequently) the further Europeanisation of these states through the prism of the current (tightened) accession conditions.

EUropeanisation with an Ever-Increasing Number and Toughness of Conditions

Although it is generally used in a much broader sense and related to the transfer of political, socio-economic and cultural values, norms and attitudes developed in (predominantly Western) European countries and societies to non-European countries (Featherstone, 2003; Flockhart, 2010), the meaning of the term 'Europeanisation' in the modern political science literature dominantly corresponds to the process of European integration, and is in fact EU-centric (Flockhart, 2010, p. 789). It is primarily used to define the process of transfer (and adoption) of norms, procedures and regulations which exist at the EU level to the political, legal and social structures of the member states (Radealli, 2003) or to the countries which wish to become EU

[3] *The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European Integration*, adopted by the conclusions of the EU General Affairs and External Relations Council of 16 June 2003 and endorsed in the conclusions (Art. 41) of the European Thessaloniki Council of 19–20 June 2003.

members (Grabbe, 2003, 2006). The term will be used in this chapter as given in its title—'EUropeanisation', i.e. in the context of the ability of candidate countries for EU membership to meet the EU's accession conditions and thereby comply with and adopt the core EU values and norms[4] which are incorporated in the accession conditions (Manners, 2002). While Ian Manners in his seminal paper identifies five core norms which comprise the EU's normative power or 'normative power Europe',[5] this chapter focuses on those core accession conditions (i.e. values and norms) for which the measurement tools have been developed and extensively utilised by undisputed international research centres and organisations. The Freedom House's democracy score, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (TICPI) and indicators of economic transition from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) will be used as the basic denominators of successful compliance with the accession conditions and thereby the successful adoption of EU values and norms by individual countries.

As discussed in the introduction, slow progress in post-communist transition and EUropeanisation of all the Balkan countries in the years following the collapse of communist rule was a direct consequence of the political conditions in which regime change occurred in these countries. Political elites in ECE and the Baltic states, mainly recruited from the former anti-communist (and pro-Western) liberal democratic opposition, rushed to pull their countries out of the deep economic and social crisis of the early 1990s (Lavigne, 1999, Chapters 4–7; Petrovic, 2013, Chapter 1) by anchoring their post-communist reforms and economic transformation to the establishment

[4]However, at places where the discussion considers the adoption of (Western) European values and norms in a broader sense, not directly related to the adoption of EU regulations and norms through the accession process, the term will be referred to without a capital 'U'—'Europeanisation'.

[5]*Peace, liberty democracy*, the *rule of law*, and respect for *human rights*, 'all of which are expressed in the preamble and founding principles of the TEU, the development co-operation policy of the Community (TEC art. 177), the common foreign and security provisions of the Union (TEC art. 11), and the membership criteria adopted at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993' (Manners, 2002, p. 242).

of closer ties and (after 1993) the process of accession to the EU. However, the post-communist political elites in the Balkan states were dominated by members of the former communist nomenklatura who preferred an 'illiberal concept' of democracy (see Footnote 2) and were therefore not genuinely interested in substantial reforms and even less so in obtaining the EU's conditional assistance for reforms. Moreover, the successor states of former Yugoslavia sank into wars and ethnic conflicts. Under such conditions one certainly could not have expected the Balkan post-communist states to be able to meet any of the basic accession conditions defined at the European Council meeting in June 1993: '[s]tability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy…' (European Council, 1993, 7.A. iii). Nevertheless, as soon as governmental power was taken by 'real reformers' and pro-European political actors in Romania and Bulgaria in 1996 and 1997, respectively, relations between these two and the EU improved, and they opened accession negotiations in February 2000, together with three 'late reformers' from ECE and the Baltics: Slovakia, Latvia and Lithuania (see indicators in Table 4.1). Soon after, significant acceleration in the post-communist political and economic transition of these two countries[6] was rewarded by membership of the EU, on 1 January 2007 (only two and a half years after the ECE and the Baltic states had joined on 1 May 2004).

While foreign financial and economic assistance was enormously important for all of the countries that, after 40 years of communist economic underachievement, had fallen in the deep transitional socio-economic crisis, the EU's conditional offer of membership and the opening of accession negotiations (which also included significant financial assistance), was the most valuable assistance by far in conducting and consolidating economic reforms and democratic institutions in post-communist states. By being required to fulfil the above-defined accession conditions through successful negotiation of the 31 (35 after

[6]However, the level of corruption in them remained very high throughout a long period after their accession (Table 2).

Table 4.1 Indicators of post-communist democratisation and marketisation

	Democracy score*				TICPI***				Economic transition**		
	1999	2006	2014	2017	1999	2006	2014	2017	1999	2006	2014[a]
Hungary	***1.88***	***2.14***	***2.96***	***3.71***	***52***	***52***	***54***	***45***	***3.7***	***3.9***	***3.9***
Poland	***1.58***	***2.36***	***2.18***	***2.89***	***42***	***37***	***61***	***60***	***3.5***	***3.7***	***4.1***
Slovakia	***2.71***	***2.14***	***2.61***	***2.61***	***37***	***47***	***51***	***50***	***3.3***	***3.7***	***4.0***
Latvia	***2.29***	***2.07***	***2.07***	***2.07***	***34***	***47***	***55***	***58***	***3.1***	***3.6***	***3.9***
Lithuania	***2.29***	***2.29***	***2.36***	***2.36***	***38***	***48***	***58***	***59***	***3.1***	***3.7***	***3.9***
Romania	*3.54*	*3.29*	*3.46*	*3.46*	*33*	*31*	*43*	*48*	*2.8*	*3.3*	3.7
Bulgaria	*3.58*	*2.89*	*3.29*	*3.39*	*33*	*40*	*43*	*43*	*2.8*	*3.5*	*3.7*
Croatia	*4.46*	*3.75*	*3.68*	*3.75*	*27*	*34*	*48*	*49*	*3.0*	*3.5*	*3.8*
N. Macedonia	3.83	3.82	4.07	4.36	33	27	45	35	2.7	3.1	3.6
Albania	4.75	3.82	4.14	4.11	23	26	33	38	2.6	2.9	3.5
Bosnia-Hrz	5.42	4.04	4.46	4.64	N/A	29	39	38	2.0	2.6	3.1
Montenegro	5.50	3.93	3.89	3.93	N/A	N/A	42	46	1.6	2.5	3.3
Serbia	5.50	3.68	3.68	3.96	24	27	41	41	1.4	2.7	3.2
Kosovo	N/A	N/A	5.14	4.93	N/A	N/A	33	39	N/A	N/A	2.9

Source Freedom House, Nations in Transit (various years); EBRD, Transition Report (various years); Transparency International, Corruption Perception Index (various years)

[a]The EBRD significantly changed its methodology for calculating indicators of economic transition after 2014 so that the data for more recent years are incomparable to those of previous years and could not be included in the table

*Freedom House, Nations in Transit (NIT) 'democracy score' (1 being the highest: full democracy; 7 being the lowest). As the NIT publication (issued annually in June) shows the state of play during the previous year, the scores given in the above table for particular years (e.g. 2017) are actually published in the NIT publication for the following year (2018 in this case)

**EBRD economic transition indicators (4.33 = standards of advanced industrial [market]economies; 1 = standards of a centrally planned economy)

***Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (100 being very clean; 0 being highly corrupt)

2005—see below) negotiation ('acquis') chapters, which represent the body of EU laws and regulations and cover the complete legal and institutional framework for the functioning of a country's economic and sociopolitical system, the candidate countries have in the same time received a design, content and instructions for how to introduce necessary post-communist reforms. The opening of the accession negotiations process with the EU has therefore significantly sped up and contributed to the successful building of democratic and market economy institutions in the candidate countries from former communist Europe, as none of them had any previous experience or resources for constructing and setting these up on their own.[7]

However, Albania and the ever-increasing number of successor states of former Yugoslavia (excluding Slovenia) had to wait much longer to receive the EU's invitation for accession and, with it, necessary support and assistance for their post-communist political and economic transformation. The first comprehensive EU incentive for closer cooperation with this group of post-communist states, which have been labelled the 'Western Balkans' was launched after the conclusion of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (B-H) in the mid-1990s, and its main objective was to restore peace and stability in the region together with boosting post-communist reforms. It was initially named the 'coherent strategy' and quickly evolved into the 'Stabilisation and Association Process' (SAP).[8] The SAP gained importance after the death of the Croatian authoritarian president Tudjman in December 1999 and the overthrow of the Serbian post-communist dictator Milošević in October the following year, when the two largest Western Balkan states finally obtained pro-reformist and pro-EUropean governments. The prospects for full EUropeanisation of the Balkans appeared to be highly promising by the adoption of the 'Thessaloniki Agenda' in June 2003, which clearly stated:

[7]The importance of the opening of the accession negotiation process, as the most important form of external assistance for the successful post-communist economic and sociopolitical transition of a former communist state, is discussed in greater detail in Petrovic (2017) (see also Lavigne, 1999; Petrovic, 2013; Pridham, 2005; Vachudova, 2005).

[8]For more details on this see EU General Affairs Council (1997) and EU General Affairs Council (1999).

> The Western Balkans and support for preparation for future integration into European structures and ultimate membership into the Union is a high priority for the EU. The Balkans will be an integral part of a united Europe. (paragraph 2)

These political changes in the Western Balkan states and their improved relations and intensified cooperation with the EU were quickly effectuated through a very rapid improvement of democratic conditions, and the strong economic transformation of these states throughout the first half of the 2010s (Table 4.1). However, enlargement enthusiasm and hopes for the relatively quick accession of the Western Balkan states to the EU did not last long. Even before its mega-enlargement was completed with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, the EU decided to 'renew [the] consensus on enlargement' (European Council, 2006, point 4). Adopted under the pressure of emerging *enlargement fatigue* and fears for the EU's 'absorption/enlargement capacity' (Petrovic, 2009; Petrovic & Smith, 2013; Phinnemore, 2006), the 'renewed consensus on enlargement' did not have any other purpose but to tighten accession conditions for new applicants. From that moment on, the basic objective of EU 'enlargement policy' towards the Western Balkan states was not to further speed up the accession of these states, but rather to try to avoid 'mistakes' from the previous enlargement rounds, particularly those related to the 'premature' accession of Romania and Bulgaria (Grabbe, 2014; Vachudova, 2014).

Instead of receiving further assistance and encouragement to complete the remaining necessary reforms that could enable them to more quickly and easily meet the existing accession conditions, the Western Balkan states have been given the tightened (second layer of) Copenhagen accession conditions (European Commission, 2006; European Council, 2006) and (rightfully deserved) SAP conditions regarding post-war reconciliation and peace-building in the region—both groups of conditions from which countries of the 2004/07 enlargement round were spared. Moreover, on top of these conditions, the Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for EU membership also received the fourth layer of 'Copenhagen plus -plus -plus conditions' (Petrovic, 2017; Petrovic & Smith, 2013) in the

form of requests for compliance with the EU's state-building incentives and proposals for solving intraregional disputes related to the contested statehood status of most Western Balkan states.[9] While the EU's request for the fulfilment of the Copenhagen accession conditions has, as discussed above, been of great assistance to the ECE and the Baltic post-communist states, through providing them with advice and guidelines for building democratic institutions and a market economy, the EU's request for compliance with its proposals for solving intraregional and intra-national statehood disputes was often a 'pure burden' on the Western Balkan states, which could not have much assisted, but only postponed, their EUropeanisation. As argued in Petrovic 2013, Chapter 5 (see also Bieber, 2011; Noutcheva 2009, 2012; Petrovic, 2017) most of these proposals and incentives, especially those regarding the centralisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recognition of Kosovo's independence and the resolution of the Greek—North Macedonian dispute regarding the 'naming issue' did not only put 'high political costs of compliance on the targeted governments' (Schimmelfennig, 2008) but were also inappropriately formulated (or not formulated at all, with regards to the Greek-Macedonian dispute), with very little respect for the countries' specifics and realistic chances of meeting them. Despite some successes in initiating and managing the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and maintaining peace and stability in B-H and Kosovo (foremost by the use of EU civil and military/police missions) these EU incentives were obvious examples of external demands which did not consider 'the strategic behaviour of domestic actors and constrains they face…[and therefore] neglect[ed] the rational interests of domestic actors and the dynamics of two-level game negotiations' (Börzel & Grimm, 2018, p. 124).

However, the list of hurdles which the Western Balkan states have had to face on their way to eventual EU membership did not end here. After the 'enlargement enthusiasm' in the core EU member states sank further with the emergence of the global financial and economic crisis

[9]Of all the Western Balkan states only Croatia, Montenegro and Albania were spared of this 'fourth layer' of accession conditions that related to the disputed statehood status of B-H, Kosovo (and Serbia) and North Macedonia.

of 2008/09, with the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis in 2010 and when it became certain that Croatia would join in 2013, the EU decided to further tighten the accession process for the new candidates, i.e. for the Western Balkan states.[10] This time the accession conditions were not officially changed, but the Commission decided to 'put particular emphasis on the three pillars of the rule of law, economic governance and public administration reform' (European Commission, 2014, p. 1). In other words, it was decided that the accession negotiations chapters which cover these three pillars should be opened among the first, and thoroughly negotiated to ensure 'a stronger focus on addressing fundamental reforms [in the candidate countries] early in the enlargement process' (ibid., p. 1). It was expected that the candidate countries would in this way be better prepared for accession (than was the case in the previous enlargement rounds) and therewith also ensure that 'enlargement is not at the expense of the effectiveness of the Union' (ibid., p. 1).

In this way the Western Balkan states have been, unlike the ECE and the Baltic post-communist states and even their Balkan neighbours Bulgaria and Romania, exposed to an ever-increasing number of conditions that they needed to meet on their way to EU accession. While such an EU approach can partially be grounded in a genuine need to assure the successful building of state and government institutions in the largely dysfunctional Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (and to some extent also in Albania which suffered from an enormously high level of corruption and weak governance—see e.g. Bogdani, 2015), it was largely counterproductive in the cases of Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia. By 2006, these three Western Balkan states were more or less on the same level of consolidation of their democratic institutions with that of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia at the time when they opened accession negotiations with the EU in 2000 and 2005, respectively (compare indicators in Table 4.1, see also Petrovic & Smith, 2013).

[10]By that time Turkey's accession had effectively fallen from the enlargement agenda due to both increased opposition to it in the leading EU member states and internal developments in Turkey, particularly President Erdogan's increased authoritarianism and his lack of desire to comply with EU demands and meet accession conditions.

All in all, neither the tightened accession conditions of 2006 nor the 'three pillar' approach after 2012/2014 have contributed to significant improvements in the democratisation of any of the Western Balkan states (Table 4.1), but they definitely increased the burden (and time) to these states in acceding to the EU. If the success of the process of Europeanisation through enlargement conditionality is strongly determined by the credible membership perspective and the clarity and consistency of the accession conditions (Schimmelfennig, 2008; Zhelyazkova, Damjanovski, Nechev, & Schimmelfenning, 2018), and these two have not only been largely ignored but also accompanied with requirements for solving complex intraregional statehood disputes that did not have many chances to be positively responded by the domestic political elites—then it is obvious that the ability and/or capacity of the candidate countries to comply with the given accession conditions has become an insignificant criterion of successful accession/EUropeanisation. A state cannot be blamed for not meeting certain accession criteria if the criteria has not been clearly and realistically set, nor if the state is uncertain of the consequences of compliance and non-compliance.[11]

Can They Ever Be EUropeanised?

The ever-increasing toughness, number and vague character of some of the accession conditions had, as discussed in the previous section, significantly increased difficulties for the candidate states in meeting these conditions and resulted in the more or less completely stalled process of accession of the Western Balkan states to the EU during the

[11]In the thus far most comprehensively conceptualised theoretical explanation of Europeanisation through EU enlargement conditionality, Schimmelfenig (2008), following his and Sedelmeier's conceptualisation of 'the external incentives model of conditionality and Europeanization' (2005), identifies the following three crucial requirements for successful (external) Europeanisation: (i) the [credible] conditional offer of EU membership to the target government; (ii) the normative consistency of the EU's enlargement decisions; and (iii) low political compliance costs of the target government (p. 921). The third requirement also includes the 'capacity of candidate countries [to adopt and implement the suggested conditions/norms]' (Zhelyazkova et al., 2018, p. 19).

Table 4.2 Progress in EU accession

	Signed association/SA agreement	Entered into force	Membership application	Accession negotiations opened	Accession negotiations closed
Poland	16.12.1991	1.02.1994	1.04.1994	31.03.1998	12.12.2002
Hungary	16.12.1991	1.02.1994	8.04.1994	31.03.1998	12.12.2002
Slovakia	4.10.1993[a]	1.02.1995	27.06.1995	15.02.2000	12.12.2002
Latvia	12.06.1995	1.02.1998	27.10.1995	15.02.2000	12.12.2002
Lithuania	12.06.1995	1.02.1998	8.12.1995	15.02.2000	12.12.2002
Bulgaria	8.03.1993	1.02.1995	14.12.1995	15.02.2000	16.12.2004
Romania	1.02.1993	1.02.1995	22.06.1995	15.02.2000	16.12.2004
Albania	12.06.2006	1.04.2009	28.04.2009	No	No
Bosnia-Herzeg	16.06.2008	1.06.2015	15.02.2016	No	No
Croatia	9.04.2001	1.02.2005	20.02.2003	5.10.2005	30.06.2012
N. Macedonia	9.04.2001	1.04.2004	22.03.2004	No	No
Montenegro	15.10.2007	1.05.2010	15.12.2008	16.06.2012	No
Serbia	29.04.2008	1.09.2013	22.12.2009	14.01.2014 provis.[b]	No
Kosovo	27.10.2015	1.04.2016	No	No	No

Source European Commission Archive on Past Enlargements and other documents

[a]Czechoslovakia—16.12.1991

[b]The first chapters (35 and 32) were opened on 14 December 2015

first half of this decade (see Table 4.2). The only two exceptions were Montenegro and (since 2012 and particularly 2014) Serbia. The moderate progress in accession of these two, had however very little to do with their EUropeanisation through the adoption of the EU's norms and values incorporated in the (tightened) Copenhagen accession conditions, particularly not those related to the democracy standards and the rule of law (the first and the most import pillar in the post-2012 EU 'three pillars approach'). In accordance to its general approach to relations with neighbouring countries that the EU adopted after the emergence of enlargement fatigue in the mid-2000s and strengthened during the multiple crises that it faced after 2009/2010, the EU has almost exclusively insisted on compliance with its stability and security priorities in its relations with the Western Balkan candidates

(Bieber, 2018; Juncos & Whitman, 2015; Pomorska & Noutcheva, 2017). As these goals were mainly incorporated in the above discussed ill-prepared and often controversial EU incentives and proposals for solving intraregional (and intra-national) statehood disputes, such an approach could only have produced mixed, if not controversial outcomes. This explains why Montenegro, the country with a not very convincing democratic record, became the regional frontrunner in the accession process.

Although Serbia and North Macedonia have reached a similar (and in some respects higher) level of EUropeanisation than Montenegro (measured by the indicators shown in Table 4.1) and have not been led by a 'strong man', uninterruptedly for nearly three decades,[12] the progress in EU accession of these two countries was significantly slower than in the case of Montenegrin. The only reason for this was the EU's assessment of their (mainly unsatisfactory) record in contributing to the [re]solution of the statehood disputes in the region. As discussed in greater detail in Petrovic (2017), the cornerstone in Serbia's accession had become its 'commitment and achieved further progress… in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue' (EU General Affairs Council, 2012, p. 1), whereas North Macedonia had to solve its dispute with Greece about its very name. Hence, while Montenegro, which has not had to comply with additional political demands related to regional statehood disputes, was allowed to open the accession negotiations earlier and has, as of June 2019, opened 32 (and closed 3) of 35 negotiating chapters, Serbia has (only) opened 17 chapters (two of them closed) in the same time (European Commission, 2019). North Macedonia, which until

[12]Montenegro is the only post-communist state in Europe which has never experienced an electoral change of ruling party or leader. The Democratic Party of Montenegrin Socialists (formerly the League of Montenegrin Communists) and its leader, Milo Djukanović have been in power throughout the whole period of post-communist (and even the last few years of communist) history of the country. Djukanović himself has served six terms as prime minister and two as president of the country during this period. He is current President of the country, elected in the election held on 18 May 2018 (for more details see e.g. Hopkins, 2012; Tomovic, 2016; Vachudova, 2014).

very recently was not able to make any progress in talks with Greece[13] is however still waiting to open accession negotiations (Table 4.2).

This approach by the EU to the Western Balkan states' accession, which prioritised regional and national political stability (as it was understood and defined in the respective EU policy incentives), rather than meeting democracy standards and progressing with other necessary socio-economic reforms, has not only further slowed down the accession (and therefore Europeanisation) of these states, but it also had certain backslide effects on the sociopolitical stability and successful implementation of earlier introduced reforms in these states. These were especially strong in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, although respect for democratic standards and the rule of law in Serbia has also deteriorated in recent years (Table 4.1).[14] While Serbia and Kosovo were able to make some progress (not without the considerable assistance of the European Commission and High Representative Mogherini—see European Commission, 2018a, pp. 51–52) in the 'Belgrade- Pristina dialogue' and for it were awarded with some headway in the accession process, the accession of both North Macedonia and B-H completely stalled after the late 2000s (Table 4.2).

The EU's inaction in 'the naming issue' and its waiting for the Macedonian and Greek political leaderships to solve it more or less by themselves (which they were unable to do for almost three decades)[15] and the consequent continuous postponement of the opening accession negotiations, have started to significantly cool off enlargement expectations (let alone enthusiasm) in North Macedonia. This has further contributed to an increase of political animosities and social unrest

[13]Due to its potential expansionistic connotation regarding the northern Greek province with the same name, Greece strongly opposed the use of the domestically preferred term 'Macedonia' as this country's name. As a result, the country was admitted to the UN in 1992 under the 'provisional' name 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRM)' which was in official use until February 2019. In accordance to the Prespes agreement signed by the Greek and (then) FYRM governments in June 2018 (Klapsis, 2018; Tzallas, 2018) the latter's name changed to North Macedonia which is now its internationally recognised name.

[14]See also Vachudova (2018) and Freedom House (2019).

[15]The two countries had agreed already in 1995, when they formalised bilateral relations to negotiate this problem under the auspices of the United Nations; however, these negotiations have been very occasional and informal and (until very recently) without any resolute political incentive which could have moved them forward.

that in 2015 and 2016 brought the country to the brink of civil war (see Bechev, 2015; Petrovic, 2017). Similarly, in B-H the EU in the late 2000s defined the necessity of the country's constitutional change towards greater centralisation and strengthening of the role of federal institutions as the *sine qua non* for its progress in the SA and accession process.[16] However, this 'necessity' was strongly opposed by the Bosnian Serb politicians and population (and to a large extent by the Bosnian Croats as well) and had zero chance of being consensually adopted at the national level (as required by the country's constitution—see e.g. Balkaninside, 2014; Inserbia.info, 2015). As such, this EU's requirement not only stopped the country's progress in the SAP process, but became an additional source of ethnic animosities and political conflicts which resulted in destabilisation rather than consolidation of democratic institutions in the country as a whole. Therefore, speaking in terms of EUropeanisation, it could be said that the EU with the above policy of inappropriate incentives or a lack of incentives for the resolution of intraregional and intra-national political disputes related to the statehood status, obstructed rather than supported the EUropeanisation of these two Western Balkan states during the first half of this decade.

By the mid-2010s, it seemed that the EU itself began to be aware of the backsliding effects of its state-building and conflict resolution policies in the Western Balkans and of its (too) restrained approach towards Western Balkan accession. It therefore launched the so-called Berlin Process in 2014, aimed to deliver certain policy measures that could speed up EU accession of the Western Balkan states through regular high-level meetings between the six Western Balkan governments and several EU Member States (Juncos & Whitman, 2015; Vurmo, 2018). Following this line, the European Commission stated in its 2015 report on (then FYR) Macedonia (European Commission, 2015a) that 'the last decade's reforms are being undermined…' and the EU council initiated in December 2014

[16]See European Commission, *Annual Progress Reports on Bosnia-Herzego-vina* for all years in the period 2007–2015 available from the Commission's website as well as Bieber (2010), Noutcheva (2012), and Tzifakis (2012).

(EU Foreign Affairs Council, 2014) a change to its approach towards developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It placed a focus on the solution of the 'outstanding socio-economic challenges [B-H] faces' (European Commission, 2015b, p. 4), rather than on changes to its constitutional order. This resulted in the quick adoption of the so-called 'Reform Agenda for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2015–2018' by all three levels of the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina (including those of the two entities) in July 2015 (Delegation of the European Union…, 2015). The Reform Agenda initiated common reform actions which were supported by the leaderships of all three major Bosnian and Herzegovinian ethnic groups and led to the adoption of legislative changes for the organisation of the local elections in October 2016, alongside some progress in the fight against corruption and organised crime (European Commission, 2016, pp. 5–6). These positive steps in the implementation of the Agenda were relatively quickly rewarded with the EU's decision to allow the Bosnian and Herzegovinian leadership to formally submit its application for EU membership in February 2016 (Table 4.2).

Following the launch of the Berlin Process, during 2015 and 2016 the EU and the Commission in particular were also busy trying to handle explosive developments in (then) FYR Macedonia (Bechev, 2015; Petrovic, 2017) which were brought back to 'normal' only after negotiations led by EU Commissioner Hahn brokered an agreement between the four Macedonian major parties on a 'tender truce' and the early elections in April 2016 (European Commission, 2015b). The elections, which were eventually held in November 2016, were won by the centre-right VMRO party of the incumbent semi-authoritarian Prime Minister Gruevski, but with a very slim majority which did not enable him to form a new government. After several months of negotiations there was formed the current coalition government led by Prime Minister Zaev (see e.g. Testorides, 2017) the leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). As earlier stated 'less nationalist' and more open to compromise Zaev was able to finally solve the 'naming issue' with Greece in early June 2018 and in that way pave the way for his country to open the accession negotiations with the EU. These however, are still on hold (due to some 'new' internal EU

dilemmas about its further enlargement—see below) despite the EU's earlier promises and high expectations in North Macedonia.

Optimism and expectations among the Western Balkan political elites particularly raised after the European Commission President Junker's announcement in his 2017 State of the Union speech (European Commission, 2017) that the EU can expect to enlarge its membership by 2025. However, the European Commission's Western Balkan Enlargement Strategy issued in February 2018, French President Macron's repeated statements that the 'recent enlargement[s] have weakened Europe' (Gray 2018) and even some of Junker's own later 'clarifications'[17] have considerably cooled this optimism and once again sent mixed signals to the Western Balkan states. Although the basic message of the strategy and the later-issued Commission's progress reports on the Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for membership have tried to sound 'in line' with Junker's optimistic announcement, the outlined 'circumstances' under which this could happen can hardly be considered particularly encouraging for the Western Balkan aspirants to EU membership. In addition to the Commission's repeated insistence on further democratisation and the tightened criteria for closing Chapters 23 and 24 (on the rule of law, fundamental rights, freedom and security) the 2018 February Strategy also defined another 'hidden' accession condition for all the Western Balkan membership candidates—a requirement that they need to solve all their 'bilateral disputes…as a matter of urgency' (European Commission, 2018b, p. 7). This seems to be particularly demanding and challenging for the regional political elites. While Montenegro hopes to solve its only remaining (though nearly thirty-year-old) dispute with Croatia over the sea border relatively soon, the second regional frontrunner for EU membership, Serbia, and most of the remaining Western Balkan states have, as shown above, many more (and more serious) problems to resolve with their neighbours. Serbia also has to meet a particularly

[17]"The date we are indicating, 2025 is an indication not a promise. We have to know that in the old Europe, the western part of Europe but not only there, there is a kind of enlargement fatigue and this is obviously the case as far as Serbia and Montenegro are concerned' (Juncker, 2018).

challenging additional accession criterion (incorporated in negotiations of Chapter 35), which none of the previous candidates for EU membership have ever had to meet: to 'normalise' relations with its former province of Kosovo, which unilaterally declared its independence in 2008.[18] In accordance with the above-mentioned condition on the 'urgent' resolution of bilateral regional disputes in the Commission's 2018 strategy, Serbia is expected to sign a 'legally binding agreement' which will guarantee 'the full normalisation of [Serbia's] relations with Kosovo' (European Commission, 2018a, p. 4).

Although moderate progress has been achieved in relations between Kosovo and Serbia over the years that followed the launch of the EU facilitated 'Belgrade-Pristina dialogue' in Brussels in 2011, and the two parties had come quite close to a 'compromise solution' by late August 2018, inner divisions and views among EU officials and member states have effectively torpedoed the finalisation of the deal that could lead towards the signing of a 'legally binding agreement'. While the main EU officials—the High Representative Mogherini (who personally chaired the Brussels talks between the two presidents) and the Commissioner Hahn—and some EU member states (foremost Austria, Italy and Greece), together with the current US administration have supported the possible 'compromise solution' informally suggested by Serbia's and Kosovo's presidents Vucic and Thachi,[19] the leaders of other EU member states, particularly the UK and Germany, have resolutely rejected it. Claiming that any deal between the two parties that would include a 'redraw of borders' could be taken as precedent for other states with similar issues (foremost Bosnia and Herzegovina) and destabilise the region (Rettman, 2018), the latter have not only

[18]Kosovo's independence is still not officially recognised by Serbia, the UN and many other states (including 5 EU member states), but it is recognised by over 100 members of the UN and many important international organisations, such as the IMF, World Bank and (de facto) the EU itself.

[19]The main points of which are Serbia's recognition of Kosovo's independence in exchange for the alteration of current borders between the two (so that four Serb municipalities in north Kosovo will be swapped for one Albanian dominantly populated municipality in southern Serbia—see Gotev [2017]; *Politico*, August 2018) and securement of an exterritorial status for the Serbian monasteries in Kosovo (and perhaps some limited, mainly cultural autonomy for a few Serbian enclaves which will remain in Kosovo).

obstructed the 'done deal' which could have strongly boosted the EU accession bids of both Serbia and Kosovo, but have also encouraged nationalist and anti-EU stances in both governments. After the Kosovo Prime Minister Haradinaj (who also is a staunch opponent of any deal with Serbia which would include the border changes) increased the taxes on all good imports from Serbia for 100% in November 2018 (RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, 2019b) and Serbia's President Vucic repeatedly stated that Serbia will never recognise Kosovo if it does not get 'something in return' (RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty, 2019a), Serbia and Kosovo seem to be further from finding a common stance and signing the 'legally binding agreement' than they have ever been since the beginning of their Brussels talks.

Conclusion

The slower EUropeanisation of the Western Balkan states in comparison with their post-communist counterparts that joined the EU in the previous enlargement rounds is not caused by their inadequate structural capacity to complete post-communist democratisation and socio-economic transition and adopt core EU values and norms. Rather, it is the result of decisions made by political elites in the Western Balkan states and in the EU. While all the Western Balkan states as well as Bulgaria and Romania were ruled by illiberal political leaders during the 1990s, who were not interested in post-communist reform and the EUropeanisation of their countries, the reasons for the postponed EUropeanisation of these states in the 2010s should be primarily sought in the lack of genuine interest of political elites in core EU member states in EU enlargement into the Western Balkans. Instead of providing more generous technical and financial assistance for reform which could have enabled the Western Balkan candidates and potential candidates for accession to meet the accession conditions easier, the EU after 2006 tightened the Copenhagen conditions for them and started to subject their accession to the fulfilment of additional political conditions which have little to do with post-communist democratisation and socio-economic transition but much more with regional stability

and security. While Montenegro and Albania (and earlier Croatia) were spared requirements to comply with the additional EU conditions related to intraregional and intra-national disputes about statehood status, progress in the accession process of other candidates for EU membership from the Western Balkans in recent years has almost exclusively been determined by the EU's assessments of their compliance with this group of conditions. These additional accession conditions (or EU incentives) were often inappropriately formulated, with very little respect for a country's specifics and realistic chances of meeting them. Hence, it could be said that since 2006 the EU has adopted an obstructive, rather than supportive, stance towards the accession of the Western Balkan states which has not sufficiently assisted either the post-communist transition or EUropeanisation of these states.

Time will tell whether current members of the European Union will be able and willing to genuinely open the door of their organisation for a very small group of the Western Balkan states and herby support and assist the faster EUropeanisation of these states. Faster or slower, completion of post-communist transition and EUropeanisation of the Western Balkans is foremost a matter of political will, not of structural (in)capacity.

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