

VARIA

PUBLIC PERCEPTION ON THE WESTERN BALKAN STATES' ACCESSION TO THE EU. SOCIAL-CONSTRUCTIVIST INTERPRETATIONS*

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to analyse, from a social constructivist perspective, public perception on the accession of Western Balkan States to the European Union. Public opinion is an important indicator of the current situation in the region, as well as of the level of preparedness, engagement, and availability of the society to the European project and to internalize European values. For a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution and dynamics of public opinion, and whether we can discuss enlargement or accession fatigue, we have made a

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comparative analysis of polls conducted in 2010 and 2020. Moreover, since general polls are sensitive barometers and cannot be properly understood without placing them in a wider context, we have extended our research to the factors that influence public perception and the exposure to disinformation.

Keywords: Western Balkans, EU accession, public perception, social constructivism

Introduction: methodology and theoretical underpinnings

There are two main goals that this article sets: on the one hand, to investigate how EU discourse or discursive constructions create a gap between the European Union and the countries included in the Western Balkans, therefore fostering the construction of *Otherness* (by building on previous research). On the other hand, a secondary goal is to identify and analyse the ways in which the countries included in the label “Western Balkans” react to this, by exploring public opinion polls in the Western Balkan countries and by analysing how perceptions regarding the European Union are shaped. The methodology of this paper centres on constructivist and interpretative approaches. Additionally, the interpretative approach also rests upon interviews conducted with academics and policy makers in Serbia and Montenegro in November 2021.

There are a few social-constructivist tenets which provide us with a framework of analysis. First of all, we aim to present the context in which the EU (understood as social micro-structure or social and normative regional structure) interacts with agents/states included in the “Western Balkan” label. Therefore, one chief social-constructivist postulate is that human agents construct and reproduce reality through their daily practices¹ and that constructivism is based on a “social ontology which insists that human agents do not exist independently from their social environment and its collectively shared systems of meanings i.e. culture.”² By extrapolation, the social character of international life and of

¹ Berger and Luckmann called this “the social construction of reality”. See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Anchor Books, 1966.

² Thomas Risse, “Social Constructivism and European Integration”, in Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez (eds.), *European Integration Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

institutions, as explained by Alexander Wendt,³ is also meant to complete the Realist ontology, by showing that brute or material facts in world politics play a role insofar as states assign shared meanings to them; such meanings are ultimately social facts.⁴ By focusing on symbolic interactionism,⁵ constructivists show how individuals define the *Self*, the *Other* and, ultimately, *Reality*.

A secondary, intertwined sociological tenet focuses on the co-determination of social structures and agents (institutions/organizations and their components/members/states). The mutual constitutiveness of (social) structures and agents is amply emphasized in social-constructivist scholarship⁶ and is meant to show that “the social environment in which we find ourselves, defines (constitutes) who we are, our identities as social beings. “*We*” are social beings, embedded in various relevant social communities”.⁷ The mutual co-determination and co-constitution of structures and agents has been employed to show the impact of Europeanization and the ways in which European integration transforms collective identities. This is also one of our research goals in this study: to analyse the extent, level, and depth of identity transformation in the case of

³ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁴ Hidemi Suganami, “Alexander Wendt and the English School”, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 4 (December), Centre of International Relations, 2001; Michael Barnett, “Social Constructivism”, in John Baylis and Steve Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics. An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005; Friedrich Kratochwil, “Constructing a new orthodoxy? Wendt’s Social Theory of International Politics and the constructivist challenge”, in Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander (eds.), *Constructivism and International Relations*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006; Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations. The Politics of Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁵ See George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1934; Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969.

⁶ See Emanuel Adler, “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics”, *European Journal of International Relations*, 1997, Vol. 3(3), pp. 319–363; Emanuel Adler, “Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates”, in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations*, SAGE Publications, 2013; Alexander Wendt, “The agent-structure problem in international relations theory”, *International Organization*, 41, 3, Summer 1987, pp. 335-354.

⁷ Risse, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-146.

the four countries included here, namely Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. When exposed to EU interaction/norms/rules, are the identities of the countries changing? Or, rather, are they simply shifting a foreign policy agenda, focused on other national interests?

Another crucial pillar of social-constructivist theorizing revolves around the importance of rules and norms, together with the constitutive effects of social norms and institutions.⁸ James March and Johan Olsen explored the “logic of appropriateness” and emphasized the differences between strategic interaction and the rule-guided behaviour.⁹ Building on March and Olsen, Thomas Risse pinpointed to the two different logics, shown below (the table is designed by us as a way to synthesize Risse’s arguments).

Logic of consequentialism (Realist & Neoliberal)	Logic of appropriateness (Constructivist)
Social institutions (EU) constrain the behaviour of actors with given identities and preferences	Rule-guided behaviour differs from strategic and instrumental behaviour
These actors follow a 'logic of consequentialism'	Actors try to 'do the right thing' rather than maximize or optimize their given preferences.
They try to realise their preferences through strategic behaviour. The goal of action is to maximize or to optimize one's interests and preferences	Social institutions (EU) can no longer be viewed as 'external' to actors

⁸ Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989; Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

⁹ James G. March, Johan P. Olsen, *The logic of Appropriateness*, ARENA Working Papers, 2004, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548453.003.0034. See also James G. March, Johan P. Olsen, “The Institutional Dynamics of International Political Orders”, *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4, Autumn, 1998, pp. 943-969.

Institutions constrain or widen the range of choice available to actors

Actors are deeply embedded in *and* affected by the social institutions in which they act

Source: Thomas Risse, "Social Constructivism and European Integration", in Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez (eds.), *European Integration Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 147-148.

As underlined by Risse, social norms do not merely regulate behaviour, by enabling the actors to do something or by punishing deviating behaviour, "they also constitute the identity of actors in the sense of defining who 'we' are as members of a social community".¹⁰ Moreover, "EU membership implies the voluntary acceptance of a particular political order as legitimate and entails the recognition of a set of rules and obligations as binding".¹¹ Therefore, successful Europeanization would entail the genuine incorporation and internalisation of rules, vales, norms by states within the Western Balkan region, and identity transformation. EU's rules and norms would gradually be accepted as most legitimate path, and not perceived as expected behaviour which triggers strategic thinking and calculated action.

The European Union's Attitudes and Actions towards the Western Balkan Countries

The European Union has been, to some extent, engaged in the Western Balkan countries, but has shown inconsistency towards the region as well. When regions, more precisely states in a region, are not promised future integration, how efficient is the transfer of norms, rules and how deep is Europeanization? In this section we aim to analyse the EU's approach towards the Western Balkan countries and to show that the success of Europeanization is contingent not only on transformation occurring because of exposure to EU normativity, but also on the ways in which the EU presents the *Self* and the *Other* during processes and interactions with other countries.

¹⁰ Risse, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

Thomas Diez argued that “‘normative power Europe’ is a discursive construction rather than an objective fact, and that the ‘power of normative power Europe’ rests in the identity it provides for the EU and the changes it imposes on others, partly through its hegemonic status”.¹² Moreover, Diez and Pace argue that “the self-construction of the EU as a normative power has positive effects on its potential influence to bring about positive conflict transformation, while at the same time it remains problematic in the Othering that it performs”.¹³ As indicated in the previous section, Europeanization entails “a logic of appropriateness” and a process of persuasion: “European policies, norms, and the collective understandings attached to them exert adaptational pressures on domestic-level processes, because they do not resonate well with domestic norms and collective understandings”.¹⁴ According to Börzel and Risse, the internalization of norms and the development of new identities, shaped by the incorporation of shared beliefs and norms, are facilitated by “norm entrepreneurs” or “change agents”.¹⁵ The latter are individuals, experts in close contact with the European Union that have the opportunity to persuade domestic elites and the population to change their interests, expectations and beliefs.

As shown in previous works,¹⁶ we argue that a process of Europeanization cannot be linear. It is contingent on historical and political experience. Olsen showed that “an institutional perspective suggests that diffusion will be affected by the interaction between outside impulses and internal institutional traditions and historical experiences. Diffusion processes are unlikely to produce perfect cloning of the prescriptions offered. What is diffused is likely to be transformed during the process of

¹² Thomas Diez, “Constructing the Self and Changing Others: Reconsidering ‘Normative Power Europe’”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 2005, 33 (3), pp. 613-636; Thomas Diez; Michelle Pace, “Normative Power Europe and Conflict Transformation”, *EUSA Conference*, Montreal, 17-19 May 2007.

¹³ Diez and Pace, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ March, Olsen, *The Institutional Dynamics...*, 1998; Tanja A. Börzel; Thomas Risse, *When Europe Hits Home: Europeanization and Domestic Change*, European Integration Online Papers. 4:15, 2000, pp. 1-24, <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/pdf/2000-015.pdf>, accessed 22 November, 2021

¹⁵ Börzel, Risse, *op. cit.*, 2000.

¹⁶ Laura M. Herța; Adrian G. Corpădean, “Europeanisation in the Western Balkans: Challenges and Pitfalls”, in Miriam Sette (ed.), *Europe: Critical Thinking in Critical Times*, London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, 2021, pp. 25-41.

diffusion.”¹⁷ Therefore, there might be very different processes of Europeanization.¹⁸ The Europeanization of Cyprus or of Romania might very well differ from the Europeanization of Serbia, Albania or Montenegro. The process itself is not simply replicated in different areas. It entails a complex interplay between the EU structure, the “change actors”, the perceptions of people in countries confronted with Europeanization processes, the impact local communities or local historical factors have upon the structure etc. In other words, Europeanization entails a set of norms, shared beliefs and rules which are susceptible to adaptation, consolidation or altering, depending on the interplay among several historical, political, and even geographical factors.

The Europeanization of the Western Balkans is faced with other challenges, such as the question: What is behind the label ‘Western Balkans’? As indicated elsewhere,¹⁹ the term Western Balkans was coined in 2003 at the EU-Western Balkan Summit in Thessaloniki. In geopolitical terms, the phrase reflected a group of states which emerged after the dissolution of Yugoslavia (except for Slovenia) plus Albania. In social-constructivist terms, the phrase represents both a geographic reference and a social construction; it is the representation of a region via EU discourse and practices. The term Western Balkans incorporates pejorative recollections of previous perceptions of the Balkan wars, but also retains the “Balkan” enduring character of the region (often presented as opposed to the developed and civilized Europe). Therefore, the countries have been “placed” in the Western Balkans region through discourses and practices of

¹⁷ Johan P. Olsen, “The Many Faces of Europeanization”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*. Volume 40. Number 5, 2002, pp. 921–52.

¹⁸ For examples see details and extended analyses on the cases of North Macedonia/FYROM or the case of Montenegro in Adrian Corpădean, “Assessments and prospects for the integration of the West Balkans. The case of Montenegro”, *On-line Journal Modelling the New Europe*, no. 25/2018, pp. 86-105; Adrian Corpădean, “What Macedonia? Some considerations on the current perceptions of the name dispute amid FYROM’s EU integration bid”, *On-line Journal Modelling the New Europe*, no. 26/2018, pp. 15-25; Adrian Corpădean, « Les fondements de la bonne gouvernance au Monténégro dans le contexte de son intégration euro-atlantique », *Synergies Roumanie*, n° 14/2019, pp. 55-67.

¹⁹ Laura M. Herța; Adrian G. Corpădean, “The social construction of identity and belonging. Perceptions of EU in the Western Balkans”, in Anna Skolimowska (ed.), *Perceptions of the European Union’s Identity in International Relations*, London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 42-88.

the European Union. Their belonging to this social and geographic representation was exogenous to their agency. People in countries associated with the Western Balkans have thought a lot about their former Yugoslav identity (some believing it was frail or imposed, but many strongly identifying with it), but one could easily expect them not to self-identify in “Balkan” terms. The historical narrative and representation of the Balkans as ridden by barbarity and backwardness, especially the break-up of Yugoslavia which was tackled by the media and political discourses in the West in terms of “Balkan wars”, lead to the idea that their “features” and “belonging” are decided by outsiders.

According to Kristijan Fidanovski, the label triggered certain negative effects: “it has perpetuated the ever-present stereotype of Balkan backwardness; restored the old stereotype of ‘Balkan-ness’ as ‘Westernness’ in waiting; pitted (Western) Balkan nations against each other; and, most importantly, delayed the region’s European integration that it was allegedly created to accelerate.”²⁰ Consequently, the term Western Balkans incorporates pejorative recollections of previous perceptions on the Balkan wars, but also retains the “Balkan” enduring character of the region (often presented as opposed to the developed and civilized Europe).

Treated as an interactive, on-going process, Europeanization refers to an agent-structure relation: the European Union as a structure impacts the agents’ national policies and transfers a framework of normative knowledge and expected behaviour; at the same time, however, the agents also play a role in altering or revisiting the key attributes of the structure.

If Europeanization entails a process in which the sense of Europeanness is perceived as belonging solely to one part of Europe and is believed to be *terra incognita* to others, it is fair to assume that the outcome will only strengthen the creation of *otherness*. It has often been shown that the Western Balkans re-emerge in the European discourse in contexts of crisis (such as the refugee crisis) or when other key players (such as Russia or China) are moving closer. We re-iterate the idea that the Western Balkan countries could end up as victims of a self-fulfilling prophecy. They will always exhibit setbacks and lag behind in the integration process because

²⁰ Kristijan Fidanovski, “Why I don’t like the term ‘Western Balkans’. A comment”, *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*, <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Balcani-notizie/Why-I-don-t-like-the-term-Western-Balkans-187621>, accessed 28.05.2018.

this is expected of them anyway. As such, lack of positive development will not be explained by pinpointing to specific manageable issues, but by correlations with some sort of endemic character of the region. In other words, they will allegedly fail because they are Balkan, because they still carry the burden of the violent historical past. In other words, an attempt of re-imagining the Balkans, as embedded in EU practice towards Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, would be helpful in avoiding reified negative features along geographical, historical and civilizational separating lines.²¹

Does this ohering or hiatus shaped by the EU's approach to the region create a deadlock in which enlargement fatigue produces accession fatigue?

Reactions from the Western Balkan Countries

1. Public opinion across the polls

In order to observe the evolution of the public perception on the accession of the Western Balkan states to the European Union, we have analysed the results of two polls conducted in an interval of ten years and published in 2011 and in 2021. The choice of the two polls was made based on the relevance and legitimacy of the publishers and authors, as well as their reach, and, consequently, their impact. Thus, we have focused on the reports published by the Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), an agency of the European Union, namely *The Western Balkans and the EU: 'the hour of Europe'*²² of June 2011 and the *Public Opinion Poll in the Western Balkans on the EU Integration*,²³ published in November 2021 by BiEPAG - The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group and resulting from a public opinion poll

²¹ Laura M. Herța, "Why Re-imagining the Western Balkans is important for the New European Union", in Valentin Naumescu (ed.), *The New European Union and Its Global Strategy: From Brexit to PESCO*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, pp. 237-256.

²² Institute for Security Studies - EUISS, *The Western Balkans and the EU: 'the hour of Europe'*, Ed. Jacques Rupnik, Caillot Papers, June 2011, https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/cp126-The_Western_Balkans_and_the_EU_0.pdf, accessed on 03.07.2021.

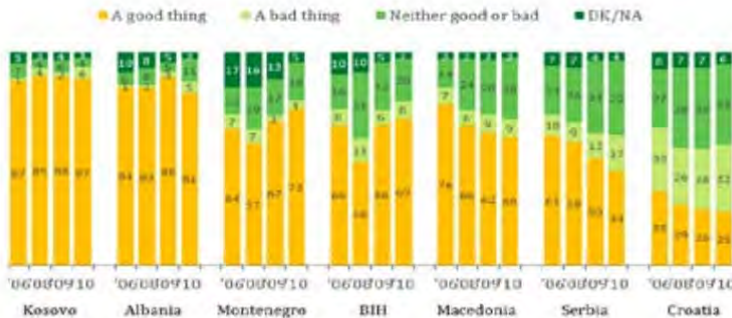
²³ BiEPAG - The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *Public Opinion Poll in the Western Balkans on the EU Integration*, 08.11.2021, <https://biepag.eu/news/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/>, accessed on 12.11.2021.

commissioned by the European Fund for the Balkans and conducted by IPSOS Strategic Marketing in Western Balkan countries in October 2020. The four counties that represent the subject of our analysis are Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania.

The first aspect we have analysed is whether the state’s accession to the EU is considered as being a good or a bad thing. Since the graphs available also cover the evolution in this respect from 2006 to 2010, the 2011 report enabled us to have an even wider perspective on the evolution of public perception.

As we can observe in the chart below, in the case of Serbia positive attitudes towards EU accession decreased from 2006 to 2010 (61% vs 44%). Respondents in Montenegro, even if fluctuations have been registered in this above-mentioned interval, declared having more a positive attitude in this respect and we can observe a small increase from 64% to 72%. In the case of Albania, even though there is a small decrease in positive attitudes for 84% to 81%, note should be taken that, in comparison with the other three states, the highest percentage of those perceiving EU membership as a good thing was registered. North Macedonia registered the highest decrease in positive attitudes in the interval 2006-2010, from 76% to 60%.

No consistent pattern in the level of EU support – increases in BiH and Montenegro, but decreases elsewhere

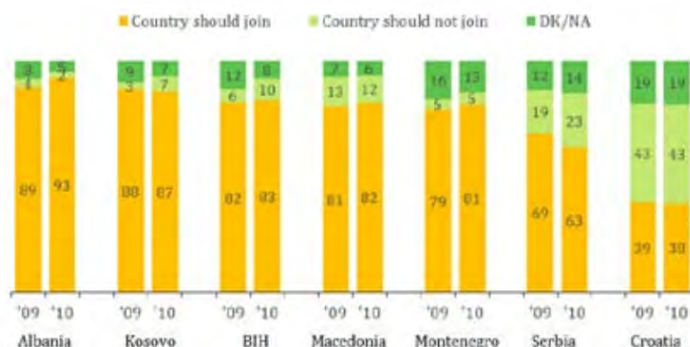


Generally speaking, do you think that [country]’s membership of the European Union would be a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?

Figure 1. Attitudes on country’s membership of the EU²⁴

²⁴ Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), *op. cit.*, p. 166.

However, what is interesting to observe is the high percentage of respondents that were undecided on whether EU membership is a good or a bad thing (particularly in Serbia and North Macedonia) and how they related to voting in favour of EU membership. Based on the discrepancies between the results presented above and those in the chart below, we can presume that the undecided respondents caused the differences in percentages.



If there was a referendum on Sunday on whether [country] should join the European Union, which way would you vote?

Figure 2. *Voting for/against country joining the EU - 2011.*²⁵

Hence, in all four countries the percentage of respondents that would vote for EU membership is higher than those perceiving this membership as being a good thing:

Country	% in favour of EU membership
Serbia	44% vs 63%
Montenegro	72% vs 81%
Albania	81% vs 93%
North Macedonia	60% vs 82%

Taking into consideration these differences, we have used both results to make a comparison with the reports from 2021. As illustrated in

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 167.

the chart below, the respondents in three out of the four countries have been mostly in favour of joining the EU, whereas in Serbia only approximately half of the respondents have been in favour of EU membership.



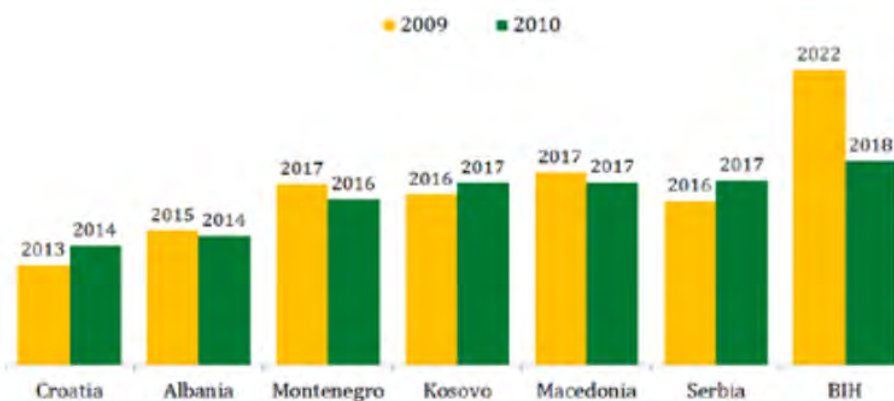
Figure 3. For/against country joining the EU²⁶

Summarizing the results illustrated in the charts above, we can observe that Serbia is also the country that registered the highest decline in positive perception on EU membership from 2010 to 2020, North Macedonia registered a lower decline, whereas Montenegro and Albania registered a slight increase in positive attitudes. However, when examining the percentages from 2010 and 2020 in comparison, we should also take into consideration that the question addressed did not refer to how citizens would vote, but to whether they are in favour of joining the EU or not.

Country	2010	2020
Serbia	44% / 63%	53%
Montenegro	72% / 81%	83%
Albania	81% / 93%	94%
North Macedonia	60% / 82%	79%

²⁶ BiEPAG - The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *op. cit.*

Another aspect that we have analysed refers to the estimations that the respondents have made on the year when their countries are to join the European Union. According to the report from 2011, the respondents from Albania have been the most optimistic regarding the date when they would join the EU (estimated 2014-2015), whereas those from Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia, with small discrepancies in trends, estimated the interval 2016-2017 as period of accession.



When, in which year do you think [country] will be a part of the European Union?

Figure 5. Estimates on when WB countries will join the EU - 2011²⁷

In contrast, the results of the study from 2021 portray a completely different perception in this respect, with approximately a quarter of respondents in the region believing they will never join the EU. The highest percentages have been registered in Serbia (44%), followed by North Macedonia (34%), and the most optimistic predictions have been made by the respondents from Montenegro (46% - in the next 5 years).

²⁷ Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), *op. cit.*, p. 169.

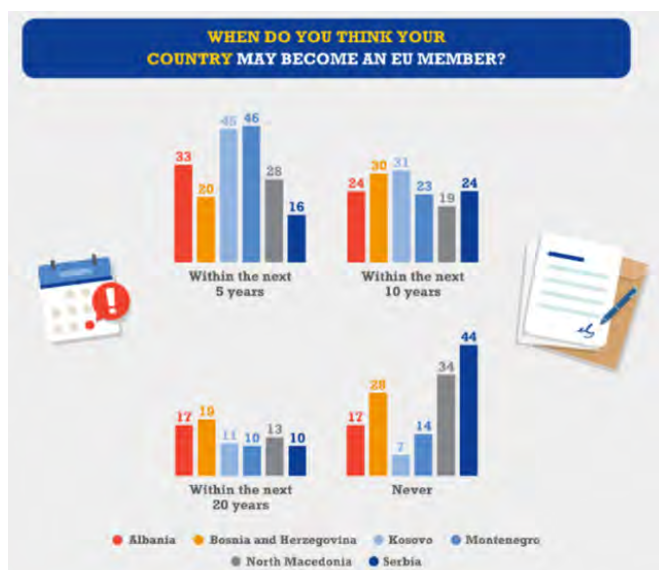


Figure 5. Estimates on when WB countries will join the EU - 2021²⁸

In this context, the so-called *accession fatigue*²⁹ is justifiable, as it is visible that the expectations of the citizens from 2010 are far from having been met.

Another indicator of the expectations of the citizens is represented by their responses related to what measures should be taken by the EU to support the accession of Western Balkans states. Corruption continues to be a challenging problem in the region³⁰ and an impediment to EU accession. However, when asked what the EU could do to help the country advance towards EU membership, “softening the conditions of accession” and “providing more financial assistance” scored higher than “being tougher with national politicians in the Balkan countries” and “better monitoring of EU financial assistance”. Hence, we can conclude that interference in the

²⁸ BiEPAG - The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Velina Lilyanova, *The Western Balkans and the EU Enlargement and Challenges*, European Parliamentary Research Service, September 2016, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>, accessed on 23.11.2021.

³⁰ Mathias Bak, *Western Balkans and Turkey: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption*, U4 Anti-Corruption Research Center, Transparency International, 12.11.2019, <https://www.u4.no/publications/overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption-in-the-western-balkans-and-turkey.pdf>, accessed on 03.09.2021.

internal affairs of the states is not considered as being opportune by the citizens and that the role of the EU is regarded more as a provider and enabler than as an active actor within the states.

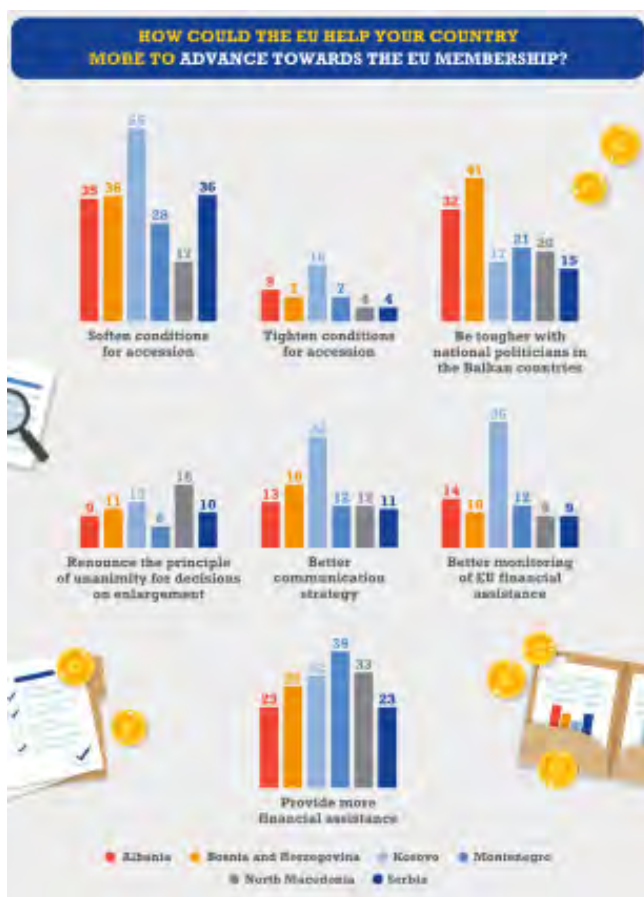


Figure 6. The manner in which the EU can support the accession of Western Balkans states ³¹

Nevertheless, apart from the slow progress towards EU accession relative to the expectations of the citizens a decade ago, there is another important aspect that we should look into, namely what influences the perception of the citizens in the region and to what extent they are exposed and susceptible to disinformation.

³¹ BiEPAG - The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *op. cit.*

2. What influences public perception on the EU in the region?

For a better understanding of the degree to which the citizens in the Western Balkans region are susceptible to fake news and disinformation, we have consulted the study *Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them*,³² requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs and authored by King's College London academics, which provides a comprehensive analysis of the events and disinformation in the region in the period from 2018 to 2020.

Next, since each state has its own particularities and a regional perspective is insufficient to properly understand the state of affairs, we will present what the findings of the study are for Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania.

The findings for Serbia portray a “deterioration in the quality of media coverage” and a government that is undertaking campaigns to weaken the support for the EU and NATO. Disinformation is presented as originating mostly from within the country, the media being dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and by President Alexander Vučić, whereas “international actors play a relatively minor role in the Serbian disinformation landscape”. State-sponsored TV stations, such as TV Pink, or tabloids, are considered as being a consistent source of disinformation. Pro-Russia discourse and “negative reporting about the EU, NATO and the west in general” are visible on social-media as well, although less impactful than the sources mentioned above. Allegations of fake social media profiles have been made, and the authors give in this respect the example of more than 8558 Twitter “state-backed” accounts deleted in April 2020 for spreading disinformation. Through these campaigns, European values are not presented as compatible with, but as opposing the development of the state.³³

³² Samuel Greene *et al.*, *Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them*, Study requested by the AFET committee, European Parliament, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf), accessed on 04.10.2021.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

On the opposite side, the CNN affiliate N1 TV station, the major independent TV station in Serbia, is facing constant attacks on social media, smear campaigns and intimidation, according to RSF - Reporters without Borders.³⁴ A Human rights Watch 2021 report on the freedom of media confirms the conclusions above related to the attacks against independent journalists and those that are not pro-government, and evaluates the response from Serbian authorities as being “inadequate”.³⁵

For Montenegro, the *Mapping Fake News and Disinformation* report indicates that there is a very strong influence from the Serbian media, as well as the Russian one. However, similar to the case of Serbia and in spite of the interrelations observed between the media in the two neighbouring countries and the other external influences presented, most of the disinformation is considered to be domestic. Russian and Serbian external influence in disinformation is exemplified by the coup d'état from 2016, against Prime Minister Đukanović, when activities in this respect aimed to prevent Montenegro's NATO accession. With regards to social media, the study does not provide much information and Facebook is portrayed as not being “particularly popular”.³⁶

Nevertheless, some of the findings of the study discussed above have been questioned and deemed inaccurate. The Digital Forensic Center, for example, established by The Atlantic Council of Montenegro to fight against fake news and disinformation, demanded clarifications for certain aspects that they considered incorrect. Hence, Facebook is presented as having a substantial number of users, more than 400.000, which, relative to the population of the country of approximately 620.000 citizens, shows a high reach of the platform. Moreover, the conclusion that most disinformation is produced within the country is contradicted as the authors of the article believe that “given the popularity of the Serbian media in Montenegro – the media recognized for spreading tendentious content and disinformation – it is evident that a large number of such

³⁴ Reporters without Borders, *Independent Serbian TV channel subjected to smear campaigns*, 20.11.2019, <https://rsf.org/en/news/independent-serbian-tv-channel-subjected-smear-campaigns-intimidation>, accessed on 04.11.2021.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2021 - Serbia*, 2021, p. 585, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/01/2021_hrw_world_report.pdf, accessed on 04.11.2021.

³⁶ Samuel Greene et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

content is foreign".³⁷ Still, in cases where both internal and external actors are involved, we consider it is difficult to identify which of them has a higher influence and, as shown in the cases of Serbia and Montenegro, disinformation actions from abroad have been enabled internally.

Moving on to the case of North Macedonia, the *Mapping Fake News and Disinformation* report shows that disinformation is a stringent problem as well and, to exemplify, it brings forth the role played by such actions in discouraging participation in the 2018 name-changing referendum. However, a change of direction is observed, as "the recent change of government has pushed disinformation largely out of the state and mainstream media and into the margins, where it nevertheless remains a powerful force distorting internal politics".³⁸ Apart from the marginalization of biased mainstream media that used to be under the influence of the ruling party, the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, another noticeable change is considered to be the increasing influence of disinformation by Hungarian nationalists through the media outlets they purchased. Although traditional media is the main outlet of disinformation campaigns, social media platforms (particularly Facebook, YouTube and Twitter) are considered as important components.³⁹

The Media Pluralism Monitor, a project conducted by The Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, validates the claim that significant changes can be observed in this respect, namely an improvement in media freedom and pluralism from 2016 to 2020. On the other hand, a concerning conclusion is that the young population is "greatly exposed to disinformation and hate speech" via social networks.⁴⁰

³⁷ Digital Forensic Center, *Distorted Perception of Montenegro in the Study Conducted for the European Parliament*, 21.12.2020, <https://dfcme.me/en/distorted-perception-of-montenegro-in-the-study-conducted-for-the-european-parliament/>, accessed on 10.09.2021.

³⁸ Samuel Greene et al., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁰ Snezana Trpevska; Igor Micevski, *Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era : application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, The Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey in the year 2020 : country report : The Republic of North Macedonia*, Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European University Institute, Issue 2021, pp. 23-24. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71968/the_republic_of_north_macedonia_results_mpm_2021_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1, accessed on 10.09.2021.

Finally, in the case of Albania, the sources of disinformation appear to be mostly domestic “both in origin and purpose”, and, in comparison with the other three countries, much less credit is given in the study *Mapping Fake News and Disinformation* to external actors. The scope of fake news is mostly to boost traffic and for political figures to gain notoriety, and less to influence the international landscape. The attitude of the citizens is presented as largely pro-EU and pro-NATO, which undermines the capacity of disinformation campaigns to go against the west.⁴¹

We will end our short description of the Albanian media environment, with a controversial initiative of the government, the proposed “anti-defamation package”. The proposal, with the declared aim of fighting against disinformation, is considered by some national and international media and journalism organizations, such as Reporters without Borders, as an attack against media freedom of expression, since the supervision of the Albanian Audiovisual Authority (AMA) of all online media is perceived as a tool of control that could worsen the media climate.⁴²

Apart from the disinformation campaigns discussed above, citizens in the region are also faced with messages from EU officials that are sometimes inconsistent with a clear desire of further EU enlargement in the near future⁴³ and which can easily create more confusion and lead to accession fatigue, especially in the context of the current pandemic situation.

In Serbia and North Macedonia, we can observe a decrease in positive perception and in Albania and Montenegro a slight increase in the degree of positive perception regarding EU membership, comparing the reports from 2011 and 2021. However, the necessity of reading and interpreting across the polls and looking into the particular situation of

⁴¹ Samuel Greene *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

⁴² Alice Taylor, *Albania's declining media freedom won't impact EU accession*, EURACTIV.com, 13.10.2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/albanias-declining-media-freedom-wont-impact-eu-accession/>, accessed on 23.10.2021.

⁴³ Aleksandar Ivković, *After two weeks of intensified EU-WB activities, what is the state of the enlargement?*, European Western Balkans, 13.10.2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/10/13/after-two-weeks-of-intensified-eu-wb-activities-what-is-the-state-of-the-enlargement/>, accessed on 03.11.2021.

each Western Balkan state should not be disregarded, in order to properly understand the complexity of the situation in the region.

Generally speaking, there are still high degrees of disinformation in the region, whether internal or external. Hence, this problem needs to be addressed at an international level, especially since national actors are in many cases actively engaged in civil society manipulation and polarization campaigns.

Conclusions

The countries from the region labelled as Western Balkans have been going through a difficult post-socialist and post-war reconstruction. As discussed in previous works,⁴⁴ the identities in the region have always been multiple and intersecting. As a whole, the identity of the region is decided by outside actors and seems to be exogenous to the countries' agency. The term Western Balkans incorporates both prospects for future European integration, but also recollections of Balkan-ness, as opposed the rest of Europe. Such identity (with all its historical burden and innate stereotypes) has been attributed to the region. There are both rejections of this "given" identity and forms of incorporation, as if one cannot escape it.

Ever since 2003, the Western Balkans have resurfaced within the European Union's discourse. By now, phrases such as "sharing everything but institutions", "the need to keep a European perspective", "the future of Western Balkans is within the European Union" have become famous and have been quoted in various policy recommendations, articles, books, analyses.

The fact that the Western Balkans have regularly returned to the European Union's spotlight, whilst seemingly being continuously left outside, led some to believe that the region is taken for granted.⁴⁵ Others

⁴⁴ Herța, Corpădean, *The social construction of identity and belonging...*, pp. 42-88; Herța, *Why Re-Imagining the Western Balkans is Important for the New European Union*, pp. 237-256; Herța, Corpădean, *Europeanisation in the Western Balkans: Challenges and Pitfalls*, pp. 25-41; Laura M. Herța; Adrian G. Corpădean, "The European Union's Conflict Resolution Mechanisms and their Impact on the Serbia-Kosovar Reconciliation", in Raluca Moldovan (ed.), *The European Union. Policies, Perspectives and Politics*, New York: Nova Science, 2020, pp. 303-324.

⁴⁵ Horia Ciurtin, *Left Behind? Reassessing the Balkan Quest for EU Integration*, European Institute of Romania, Policy Briefs Series, No. 2, Bucharest, February 2017, accessed September 28, 2018, p. 6, http://ier.ro/sites/default/files/pdf/Policy_Brief_nr.%202_Horia_Ciurtin_Left_behind_0.pdf

assessed the post-Yugoslav space in terms of “in, almost in, and out” and as a three-layered area, namely 1) EU members Slovenia and Croatia, 2) strong candidates Macedonia and Montenegro and 3) the complex cases of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.⁴⁶ Others have distinguished among the “entrants, candidates and potential candidates”.⁴⁷

What do the opinion polls across Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia indicate? On the one hand, there is still commitment towards *and* strong belief in the European Union; this is visible in Montenegro and Albania, but North Macedonia is not very much behind. On the other hand, there are also opportunities for disinformation campaigns which are grabbed by populist politicians or bred by accession fatigue and disappointment.

In the case of Serbia, there seems to be a painful stalemate, the case of Kosovo causes a sort of hurtful deadlock, in which the EU is superposed on the West that crippled Serbian territory, but also a state of apathy, confusion and of disillusionment. The EU integration is perceived as something to be discussed later, after major transformations occur within domestic politics. Main priorities are believed to be internally oriented. The interviews we conducted indicated a sort of “coalition of unwillingness”, namely the EU declared that Western Balkans countries are important, Serbia declared that this is important for its foreign policy as well, but nothing more and consistent follows.

The case of Montenegro is different, the interviewees tend to indicate a form of consistent commitment towards the EU. Policy makers refer to the revised methodology and fight against corruption as something that needs to be tackled, “not because the EU says so, but because this is the only way forward.” In social constructivist terms, we might say that there seems to be a process of appropriateness of EU rules and norms. Also, Montenegro is presented as a small state which cannot not be focused on one path. Relations in the region are important, but the incorporation of EU norms and rules are the guiding line. The EU is not presented as an external actor, but rather as a social institution in which Montenegro places its trust.

⁴⁶ Branislav Radeljić (ed.), *Europe and the Post-Yugoslav Space*, Ashgate, 2013.

⁴⁷ Adam Fagan, *Europe's Balkan Dilemma. Paths to Civil Society or State-Building?*, London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010.

It has often been said that “Western Balkans” is a term born in Brussels and, hence, it is assigned to a region that finds itself in a position of just filling in the label. For example, Igor Štiks noticed that “the geopolitical landscape in the Western Balkans is not as uniform or homogenous as the umbrella term might suggest” and that “the region christened ‘the Western Balkans’ by Brussels is basically a space squeezed between EU Member States, supposedly destined to join them but without a clear accession timetable”.⁴⁸ The interviews conducted in the region strongly corroborate this point. Also, others emphasized that the “gaps in understanding the regional approach(es) for the Western Balkans”, since it “did not reflect any bottom-up idea pushed for by the local actors”.⁴⁹ It should be noted that identification to this label or geographic representation was not indigenous; instead, it was assigned by external actors.

In conclusion, EU’s relations with the candidate countries from the Western Balkan region should be understood as a two way street, an ongoing, interactive agent-structure interaction, in which agents are transformed and both their interest and identities might change, but also the very identity of the (social) structure is shaped by this interaction.

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⁴⁸ Igor Štiks, “The European Union and citizenship regimes in the Western Balkans”, in Jacques Rupnik (ed.), *The Western Balkans and the EU: ‘the hour of Europe’*, Chaillot Papers, June 2011, pp. 123-134.

⁴⁹ Christos Marazopoulos, *Constructing the Western Balkans: Understanding the European Commission’s Regional Approach from a Constructivist Perspective*, PhD Thesis, University of Bath, August 2013, http://opus.bath.ac.uk/44950/1/MARAZOPOULOS_Christos_PhD_Thesis_final.pdf, accessed 30.05.2018.

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