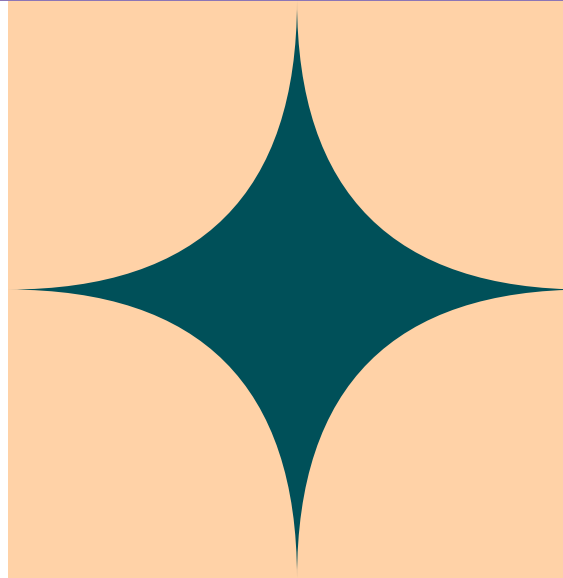


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NAVIGATING THE POLITICAL MOMENTUMS: CHARTING A PATH TO DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS AND PROSPERITY IN WESTERN BALKANS. *(AN IN-DEPTH COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ALBANIA AND SERBIA)*

By Dr. Elira Luli, iASK Research Fellow

This research explores the intricate transformations and challenges faced by the Western Balkans on the path to EU accession, particularly focusing on the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in Albania and Serbia, with the aim to comprehensively evaluate and decode the current political momentum of undemocratic trends and developments. In order to assess if there are opportunities to progress or decline in each country independently, the research pinpoints fundamental factors to deconstruct leadership agency, public institutions, and foreign policy orientations driven by significant engaged actors, possibly contributing to the development of these ambiguous zones in governance.

While both nations grapple with some similar challenges in the aforementioned areas, external political alignment emerges as a specific variable influencing political outcomes significantly not only at the regional level but also regarding their advancements towards the European Union. By assessing the most influential partnerships, the foreign policy alignment variable (depending on its articulation and which partners) can be so impactful at the current moment to either help maintain the status quo, elevate the democracy trajectory, or potentially pull it downwards.

The main aim is to explore how to disrupt the negative nexus of the factors that can erode democracy and compromise EU membership perspectives ultimately with probable tendencies to evolve into security threats on both micro and macro levels.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology is grounded in a qualitative approach, leveraging a rich array of secondary data [is1] and expert interviews. The comparative analysis offers a granular examination of the factors hindering progress in Albania and Serbia and consequently slowing the EU path. This study, when finalized, will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the current political dynamics at the domestic and regional levels. Semi-structured interviews were conducted both online and in-person, providing diverse insights into the research. Rather odd name for a methodology. Since deconstructivism is typically related to Jacques Derrida, this is quite unexpected here and requires a more detailed explanation.

WHY THESE TWO COUNTRIES?

First, a comprehensive examination of the extended transition and current political developments in the Western Balkan countries is needed, with a focus on normative backsliding. The comparative case analysis aims to highlight the unique issues and characteristics of each state, avoiding generalizations. Second, each country's foreign policy orientations and alignments differ significantly, affecting their roles in internal developments, regional politics, good neighbourly relations, stability, cooperation, sustainability and prosperity. Third, EU integration is a strategic objective for all six Western Balkan states, requiring comprehensive transformation and adherence to values, norms, and standards that will primarily benefit their societies. The international community has been involved through initiatives, efforts and internal commitments to end conflicts and achieve peace accords and stability. Montenegro has led in the integration process until now, but Albania and Serbia are pivotal actors that can foster positive change internally and regionally if they genuinely show examples of good governance, and transcend past mentalities and nationalistic narratives. Both countries can exert significant and constructive influence—Albania at a pan-Albanian level and Serbia at a pan-Slavic level—[is1] through concrete actions and practices that go beyond declarations and political statements. [is1]This terminology “pan-Albanian” and “pan-Slavic” seems outdated and arguably contains implications of ethno-nationalism.

FINDINGS FROM THE SECONDARY DATA

According to the analysis of secondary data (extensive literature review) shortfalls and discrepancies in both Leadership Agency conduct and vision and Public Institution shortcomings are more or less a 'constant' in both cases. There is a cause-and-effect relationship between the political level and the administrative level, referring here to the interactivity coming from the top level causing subsequent results at the administrative level, which is supposed to be autonomous in providing public goods. Although it is expected to serve the needs of society through numerous forms of engagement and feedback because society influences the direction and priorities of bureaucratic machinery, this interactivity is disrupted by political interests. Since the transition was long and turbulent in both cases, adding a decade of violent clashes that started with the breakup of ex-Yugoslavia, it is imperative to discover the political dynamics in each case, by seeing how the foreign policy articulations reflect back and impact their internal dynamics. These compounded political moments then resonate at the regional plan through stagnation.

Foreign policy orientation is an interfering variable in both cases that, depending on individual case conduct (which is quite different), amplifies political dynamics and shapes the course of events. According to Džananović (2020: 4), Albania's alignment with EU Foreign and Security Policy is 100%, and Albania's main foreign policy goals include EU membership, regional security, political stability, economic development, and its continuous commitments as a NATO member. The Albanian government views these priorities as compatible and interconnected, although Albania has shown to be more effective at the regional plan level than at the domestic level. Committed to the region, the EU, and NATO, Albania encourages its diaspora to promote European and Euro-Atlantic integration values see: [1].

[1] <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/16144.pdf>

In the case of Serbia, based on the same report, its alignment with EU Foreign and Security Policy has been declining – 53% in 2019; the highest recorded was in 2013 – 89% (Dzananovic 2020: 14)[1]. While in recent years it did improve “its alignment ratio”, “the significant drop (from 64% to 45%) in alignment” in 2022 “can be explained by the fact that the EU issued overwhelmingly Russia-centred declarations” (Németh 2022: 4)[2]. According to a European Commission report from 2023, Serbia's alignment rate with EU and Council Decisions increased from 46% in 2022 to 51% in August 2023, but some actions and statements contradicted EU foreign policy positions; Serbia is urged to prioritize improving its alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and to avoid actions contrary to EU positions[3]. The alignment of Western Balkan countries in the domain of foreign and security policy with EU is essential, especially considering the Russia-Ukraine war and its implications for the European security architecture and global stability. It is critical for these states to improve their performance and achieve comprehensive harmonization with the EU (CFSP) for a more efficient and constructive role in the region. This alignment is not anticipated to solve all existing political and structural challenges but is necessary to mitigate the influence of actors with interests that diverge from those of the EU, thereby preventing further destabilization in the region and beyond.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Primary data indicate that normative backsliding in Albania and Serbia is influenced by multiple factors, shaping their democratic trajectories. The political leadership in both countries has significantly influenced the trajectory of normative decline, with tendencies towards authoritarianism, breaches of the rule of law, and the concentration of power contributing to the erosion of democratic norms and institutions. Electoral fraud, opposition suppression, polarization, and weakened checks and balances have all contributed to this decline. The integrity of public administration, judiciary, and other democratic pillars—including media and civil society—has been compromised, hindering accountability, transparency, and citizen participation. These conditions still undermine judicial independence, media freedom, and civil society space, thereby weakening democratic resilience in both countries.

[2] <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/16144.pdf>

[3] <https://europeum.org/data/articles/ferenc-intempl-final.pdf>

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_23_5628

EXTERNAL ACTORS

They are critical actors in internal politics either for enacting positive change, maintaining status-quo, or deteriorating the situation. Considering how small these states are, and their capacities, and whether they follow a liberal or illiberal path and how they align and articulate their interests based on their contexts and social constructs, reveals a lot about their political momentums and future prospects. Geography matters. The Western Balkans has always been a battleground between east and west. The research recognizes three external actors, namely the EU and US, as "democracy promoters" being actively engaged with financial and technical support and Russia, reviving the strategy of confrontation since the start of the war in Ukraine. The war negatively echoes in the region since the rule-based international order and system have been abolished to a worrying degree. Other actors such as China, Turkey, and Gulf states are not to be underestimated, and they are mentioned in the research but not identified as crucial actors for this type and scope of research. Since the analysis aims to investigate whether these hybrid regimes can pose a risk to the deterioration of security and stability in the region, Russia is identified as a critical actor because of its expansionist ambitions in the context of the ongoing war, thus reviving its confrontation strategy. These war conditions have reignited debates about the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty and reinforced narratives of the past, resonating deeply within Serbia, mainly due to its historical experiences with conflict and separatist movements, most notably in relation to Kosovo. The situation in Ukraine, which has the potential to destabilize the broader region, could amplify pre-existing tensions within Serbia, particularly concerning the rights of minorities, ethnic cleavages, and nationalist fervor. There is a growing concern that these factors could fuel internal strife and political fragmentation, posing significant challenges to effective governance, societal harmony, and national solidarity within Serbia and regional stability.

Observations and Outcomes

While in Albania, although there is a 100% alignment with EU Foreign and Security Policy and it is a NATO member, worrisome is the fact that the transition has been prolonged and EU integration has been very slow; Albania has not experienced ethnic conflicts, only very profound internal political crises. The consolidation of autocracy, as evinced by numerous international reports, needs to be observed with attention while a significant change has occurred in the last eight years: the introduction of a new justice system. This system is anticipated to produce more positive outcomes.

In the case of Albania, Russia has not had a direct impact on internal politics because relations have been frozen since the onset of the Russia -Ukraine war. Nevertheless, external influences should not be underestimated, even in contexts where their impact appears limited. They are still able to use hybrid means such as political backing, unconditional economic incentives, or disinformation campaigns. By shaping the domestic political landscape and undermining internal processes, they can significantly affect geopolitical and regional dynamics.

Democratic advocates/states, long interacting with the Western Balkan region and especially in times of geopolitical constraints, have opted for stability for a long time, ignoring questions of the rule of law and democratic development and relying on leadership to expect positive changes. Although it is evident that stability is a result of effective leadership and progress in reforms, and that security is heavily dependent on good governance, 'stabilitocracy' has been a shallow option prioritized across the region. This has led to the construction of internal and regional conditions that may no longer hold without disruption, with considerable future implications.

Both countries showing weaknesses and vulnerabilities in their institutional frameworks and will be susceptible to both soft-core security issues and hard-core security issues.

Conclusions and Outlook for Future Research

The Western Balkans have a growing role in mitigating climate change and improving Europe's environmental state. In the face of heightened risk perception and urgency, the region is under increasing international pressure to adopt more climate-related policies. The qualitative content analysis of the NDCs and VNRs of five countries in the region (including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) revealed renewed political commitment to international climate agreements, the UN 2030 Agenda and EU accession. However, despite increased climate ambitions in the Enhanced NDCs, the Western Balkans are not on track to meet their climate targets by 2030. If current trends continue, all countries (except for Albania) will miss their unconditional climate targets. Document analysis further shows significant advancements in the legislative, policy, and institutional frameworks, yet fundamental shortcomings remain in implementing new laws and policies, developing human, technical, and financial capacities, and raising public awareness of climate change. Thus, meeting the 2030 climate targets depends on additional national measures and international support to provide the necessary capacities and resources for effective climate action. In view of the limited time available for meeting the ambitious SDGs and Paris goals, it is crucial for countries to adopt an approach to implementation by linking up institutional, policy, financial, and monitoring instruments and frameworks that support their implementation (cf. Bouyé et al. 2018). Given the central role of international assistance in the region, future research should focus on the role of international organizations (e.g., EU, UN) and multilateral/bilateral cooperation and the effectiveness of their programs in strengthening transformative capacities for climate action. In addition to political commitment and economic underdevelopment, placing greater emphasis on the capacity factor in climate research could yield valuable insights into the reasons for (non)compliance with international agreements in the Western Balkans. For the countries seeking EU accession, harmonizing national laws with EU legislation and meeting EU climate targets are critical, making it essential for assessing progress in implementing the Green Agenda in the Western Balkans.

Keywords that emerged during interviews:

- **Serbia - crucial actor for navigating diplomatic challenges and avoiding conflicts;**
- **Albania crucial actor for continuing to play a key role for good neighborly relations;**
- **Serbian #neutrality as pragmatic move without medium-term and long term benefits;**
- **developing #euroscepticism in the region;**
- **EU integration becoming a #distant process from the citizens and the youth;**
- **EU not #attractive anymore as a political promise for more votes, especially in Serbia;**
- **demands for the EU to become more #realistic and prioritize a #nuanced and #adaptive strategy;**
- **the EU lacks effective #communication**
- **#spill over effects from the Russia-Ukraine conflict into Serbia, #energy security in Serbia, Franko-German plan and #EU negotiation results.**

Recommendations



Applying strategies could involve:

- **Promoting transparency and accountability in political processes, ensuring that decision-making is based on normative principles and values rather than internal or external shady influences**
- **Strengthening independent institutions, such as the judiciary and anti-corruption bodies, to help safeguard the rule of law and prevent undue interference from third actors without benevolent intentions regarding EU integration.**
- **Fostering civil society engagement and media freedom can create a more robust democratic environment, enabling citizens to hold their leaders accountable and resist all forms of manipulation.**

By prioritizing internal transformative reforms and building resilience against external pressures, Serbia can progress more effectively towards EU integration while upholding democratic values and principles. Albania requires advancements in its political system, including the establishment of stable institutions and the transcendence of political polarization and divisions, particularly between the government and the opposition, as well as among factions within the opposition itself. The EU must adopt a more proactive stance, making realistic commitments to ensure and enhance its credibility as a pivotal agent capable of catalysing positive transformations in the Western Balkans. This approach should be underpinned by a concerted effort to foster cohesion and bolster strategic communication with the citizens of the Western Balkans, with a particular emphasis on engaging with the youth.

